JANUARY 2025

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DIAMOND

TOP PERFORMERS OF THE YEAR 2024

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

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Cricket today

The year 2024 saw some of the players leading the way in international cricket. Jasprit Bumrah was magnificent throughout the year, with breathtaking performances in the ICC T20 World Cup 2024 and Test cricket. His best performance came in a five-day format, and the speedster took 32 wickets in the five-Test series against Australia. He was unplayable and didn't allow the batters to break free in the Border-Gavaskar Trophy 2024-25. Joe Root scored a lot of runs in the longest format of the game and is closing on Sachin Tendulkar's world record of most runs in red-ball cricket. However, Virat Kohli, Rohit Sharma, and Babar Azam were ordinary and were slammed by the critics. In fact, Babar was dropped for two matches against England. The new selection committee was not pleased with the former captain and showed him the exit door in the middle of the series. Meanwhile, with India losing 1-3 in the five-Test series against Australia, the selectors will have to take call on the non-performers and the addition of new players to the Test squad. The batters were disappointed with no one showing consistency throughout the BGT. Bumrah was the only positive, but he didn't get support from other pacers, especially Mohammed Siraj.

The year 2024 saw some of the players leading the way in international cricket. Jasprit Bumrah was magnificent throughout the year.

India failed to qualify for the final of the World Test Champions, with Australia eliminating the sub-continent team. Australia will take on South Africa in the mega match at the iconic Lord's in June. The ICC reached an agreement with the BCCI and PCB on the Champions Trophy, which will be played in a hybrid model. The Men in Blue with play their matches in Dubai, while the matches of the other teams will be conducted in Pakistan. The two nations were threatening each other before the officials brought them to the table for the smooth organization of the big tournament. Afghanistan, Australia, England, and South Africa will play all their Group B games in Pakistan. Defending champion Pakistan is hosting its first global cricket event since 1996. After long deliberations between the ICC Board members, the game's governing body has also agreed that Pakistan will not play in India in the 2024-27 cycle. It is a tit-for-tat response to India's refusal to travel to Pakistan for the Champions Trophy. That means Pakistan will go to a neutral venue when India hosts the 2025 women's World Cup and co-hosts the 2026 men's T20 World Cup with Sri Lanka. As compensation for not hosting India at the Champions Trophy, the ICC awarded the 2028 Women's T20 World Cup to Pakistan. Enjoy the action-packed edition of Cricket Today.

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THE WEEK THAT WAS

NRMA INSURANCE
TEST SERIES
HCLTech
HCLTech
HCLTech
TOYOTA

SUPREMACY OF AUSTRALIA: The Australian team pose with the Border Gavaskar Trophy after defeating India in the fifth cricket Test at the Sydney Cricket Ground.

WINNING RUNS: Beau Webster celebrates after hitting the winning runs during play on the third day of the fifth cricket test between India and Australia.

THE WEEK THAT WAS

RECORD-BREAKING PERFORMANCE: Ryan Rickelton thanks the crowd after his 259-run innings during the second day of the second Test match between South Africa and Pakistan in Cape Town.

MALEDETTI
ROMA MARCIA ANCORA
AMO
TOYOTA
59
7
61

RISE OF ROMA: Roma players celebrate at the end of a Serie A soccer match against Lazio at the Stadio Olimpico.

THE WEEK THAT WAS

CELEBRATION TIME: The US team pose for a photo with their trophy after defeating Poland in the finals at the United Cup tennis tournament in Sydney.

HARDWORK PAYS OFF: Czech Republic's Jiri Lehecka poses after winning against USA's Reilly Opelka at their final match at the Brisbane International in Brisbane.

Cricket Buzz

"It's just that more often than not, we are the ones falling on the wrong side of it"

- Rohit Sharma on DRS controversy in fourth Test vs Australia

"Quite an emotional moment for me, good advert for test cricket"

- Temba Bavuma on South Africa's qualification for WTC Final

BOYCOTT GAME AGAINST AFGHANISTAN

England should refuse to play the Champions Trophy cricket match against Afghanistan next month according to a letter signed by more than 160 U.K. politicians. The politicians want the England and Wales Cricket Board to take a stand against the Taliban regime's assault on women's rights and boycott the men's one-day international against Afghanistan in Lahore, Pakistan, on Feb. 26. Female participation in sport has effectively been outlawed since the Taliban's return to power in 2021, a move that puts the Afghanistan Cricket Board in contravention of International Cricket Council rules. Because Afghanistan's men are still allowed to compete by the ICC, a strongly worded letter has emerged from the U.K. parliament pleading for the ECB to make its own moral objection.

PERERA HITS SRI LANKA'S FASTEST T20 CENTURY

Kusal Perera scored Sri Lanka's fastest Twenty20 international century — from 44 balls — to spur his team to a consolation win over New Zealand by seven runs in the the final match of the three-match series. Perera's career-best score in a century partnership with captain Charirth Asalanka lifted Sri Lanka to 218-5 — its second-highest T20 score, as it batted first for the first time in the series. New Zealand held a winning 2-0 lead in the series after winning the first match by eight runs and the second by 45 runs. New Zealand needed to achieve its highest run chase in T20s to complete a clean sweep of the series and was given a good start by Rachin Ravindra who made 69 from 39 balls. But it fell just short, held to 211-7.

BUMRAH IN THE RUNNING FOR BEST CRICKETER AWARD

England batter Joe Root and India pacer Jasprit Bumrah are among the four players in contention for the International Cricket Council's men's player of the year award. Prolific England batter Harry Brook and Australia's Travis Head are the other two men's nominees announced by the ICC. Bumrah took 71 wickets in 13 tests in 2024, averaging a remarkably low 14.92. He also captured 15 wickets as India won their second men's T20 World Cup title. Root has enjoyed a brilliant year with the bat, scoring 1,556 runs from 17 tests with an average of 55.57. Brook compiled 1,100 runs from 12 tests.

FRACTURED ANKLE RULES OUT SAIM AYUB

Pakistan all-format opening batter Saim Ayub has been ruled out of cricket for at least six weeks because of fractured ankle and has put his participation in serious doubt for next month's Champions Trophy. Ayub twisted his right ankle while fielding on the opening day of the second and final test against South Africa and was taken off the field by stretcher. “An MRI conducted Friday afternoon confirmed the fracture,” the Pakistan Cricket Board said in a statement. Ayub’s injury is a big blow to Pakistan. The left-handed opener had been in prolific form, especially in white-ball cricket, scoring two centuries as Pakistan swept South Africa 3-0 in the ODI series last month.

MASOOD, BABAR SHARE RECORD OPENING STAND

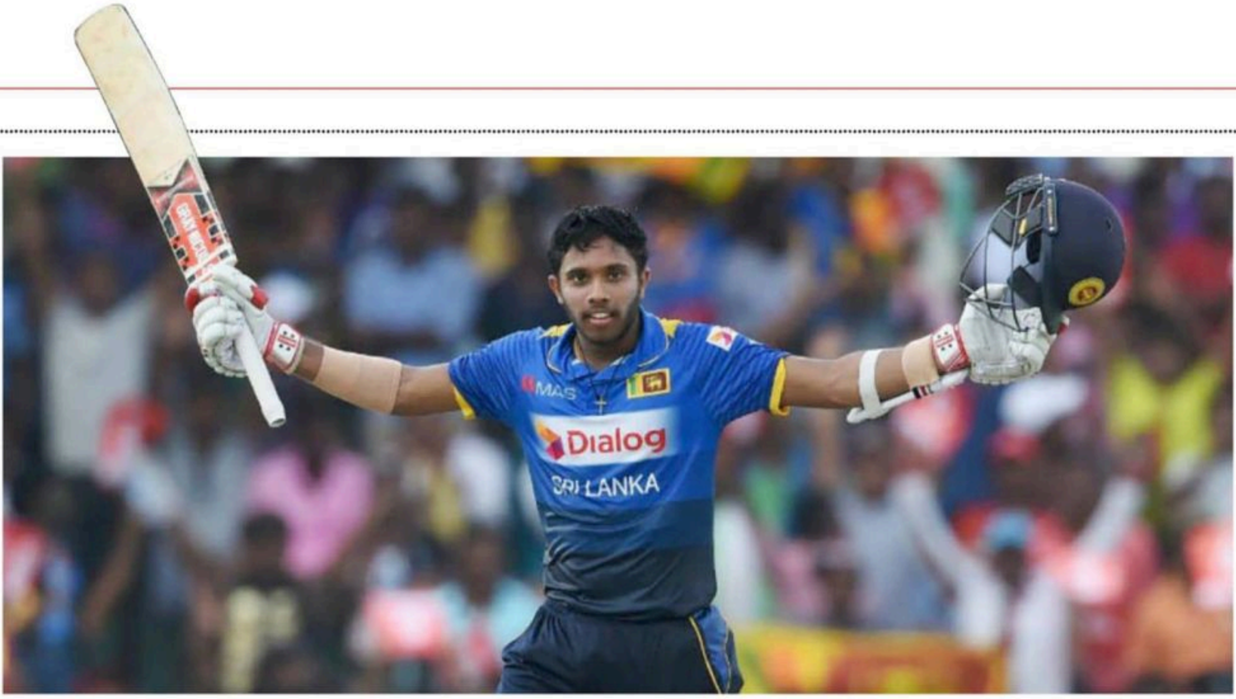
Captain Shan Masood and Babar Azam shared Pakistan’s record-breaking opening stand of 205 runs against South Africa after the Proteas enforced the follow-on on the third day of the second and final Test. Masood and Babar had defied South Africa for nearly a session and a half after the tourists lost the last six wickets for 76 runs in the first innings and were dismissed halfway through the second session of the day. Their double century stand wiped out Pakistan’s previous best opening partnership of 137 runs between Imran Farhat and Taufeeq Umar at Faisalabad in 2003. In the absence of the injured Saim Ayub, Masood and Babar showed plenty of grit and aggression the second time around.

PRESENTING THE BEST FIVE CRICKETERS IN INTERNATIONAL CRICKET IN 2024

Sri Lanka's experienced campaigner, Kusal Mendis, was the top run-scorer in international cricket (2024) across formats. As per ESPNcricinfo, Mendis had a busy 2024, playing 48 matches (55 innings). He scored 1860 runs at 37.24. His tally included 2 centuries and 11 fifties. He smashed 200 fours and 37 sixes...

BY CT CONTRIBUTOR

2024 was a vital year in international cricket. The 20-over format witnessed the ICC T20 World Cup event. In ODIs, the preparations were in full swing for the upcoming ICC 2025 Champions Trophy for the qualified sides. And in Test cricket, the headlines surrounded the build-up for the 2023-25 ICC World Test Championship. Several players impressed largely across formats whereas some dictated the show in a particular format, showing their skillset and tenacity. As 2024 ended, we look back at the top players who shone in international cricket this year.

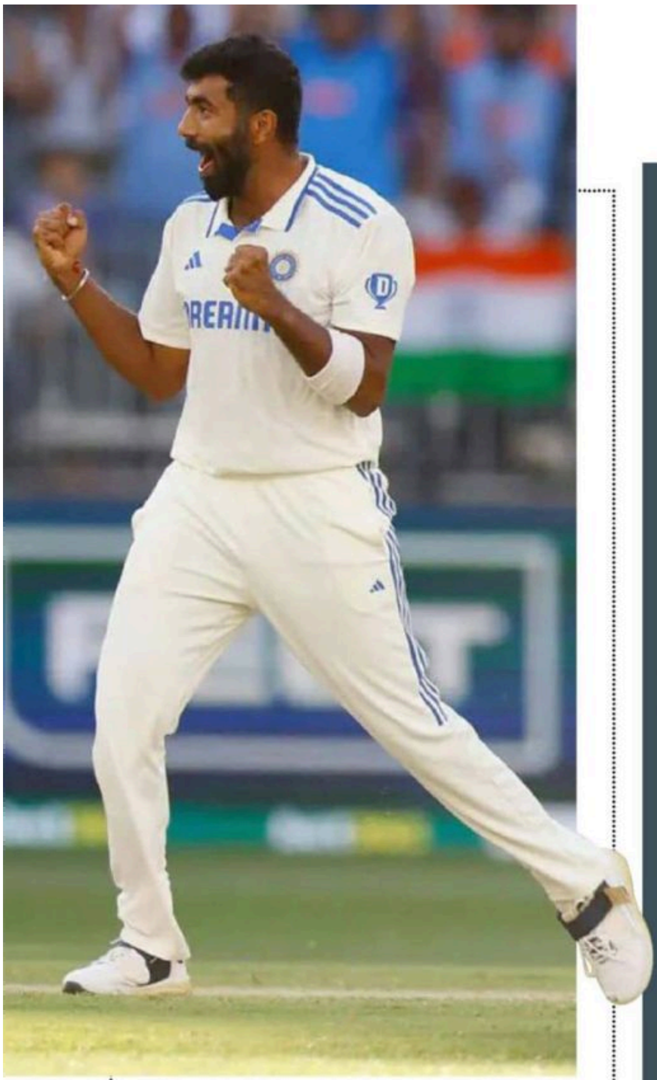


KUSAL MENDIS (SRI LANKA)

Sri Lanka's experienced campaigner, Kusal Mendis, was the top run-scorer in international cricket (2024) across formats. As per ESPNcricinfo, Mendis had a busy 2024, playing 48 matches (55 innings). He scored 1860 runs at 37.24. His tally included 2 centuries and 11 fifties. He smashed 200 fours and 37 sixes. Notably, Mendis was the top scorer in ODIs with 742 runs at 53. In 17 games, he struck six fifties and a ton. He also featured in 22 T20Is and was Sri Lanka's top scorer with 628 runs at 29.90. He spanked three fifties. Mendis also played 9 Tests for the Lankans and accumulated 490 runs at 32.66. He hit one ton and two fifties from 16 innings.

JOE ROOT (ENGLAND)

Joe Root dominated Test cricket and broke a plethora of records along the way. Despite not playing a single ODI or T20I, Root makes it to this list for his brilliance in the longest format. He was simply unstoppable in 2024, finishing as the top scorer. In 17 matches, Root smashed 1556 runs at 55.57. His tally included six tons and 5 fifties. After a slow start versus India in the first three Tests, Root struck an unbeaten 122 in Ranchi and followed that up with an 84-run knock in Dharamsala, He struck three fifty-plus scores in the series against West Indies and Sri Lanka at home. The 262-run knock in Multan against Pakistan was brilliant. His 106-run effort in the 2nd Test against New Zealand was another testament to his prowess in scoring runs everywhere. The year saw him break Alastair Cook's record as the top scorer of England in Tests. Root also became England's highest centurion. Root owns 36 Test tons and is closing in on 13000 runs (12972).



JASPRIT BUMRAH (INDIA)

Jasprit Bumrah finished 2024 as the highest wicket-taker in Tests. He also played a key role in India's T20 World Cup triumph. Bumrah, who had his workload monitored, was unstoppable. The right-arm pacer played 13 matches and bagged a staggering 71 wickets at a brilliant average of 14.92. This includes five fifers and four four-wicket hauls.He capped off the year with a record-breaking 30 wickets in the ongoing Border-Gavaskar Trophy. In the recently concluded 4th Australia vs India Test, Bumrah became the fastest Indian pacer to 200 wickets in the longest format. Bumrah also became the first-ever bowler to take 200 Test wickets while averaging below 20. Bumrah was also instrumental in the 2nd T20 World Cup triumph. The pacer played eight matches and claimed 15 wickets at an average of 8.27. His economy was a sensational 4.17. No other bowler has grabbed 10-plus wickets in a T20 World Cup edition at an economy of under 5. He finished the year with an outstanding tally of 86 wickets at an average of 13.76 and a strike rate of 26.97. Bumrah was rested from the ODI format in 2024.

TRAVIS HEAD (AUSTRALIA)

Australia's Travis Head was one of the key performers in 2024. In 5 ODI matches, the southpaw hammered 252 runs at 63. The tally included a ton (154*) against England in Nottingham. Head was a key performer in T20Is. His 539 runs at an average of 38.5 are the second-best ever for an Australian in a calendar year. His strike rate was a sensational 178.47.He started the year with impressive knocks against New Zealand, and after a dream IPL 2024 season, he carried that form into the T20 World Cup 2024. He was the third-highest run-getter in the event, scoring 255 runs at a strike rate of 158.38. He also impressed with a knock of 76 off 43 versus India. He hit one fifty each in the bilateral series against Scotland and England, respectively. Head also dictated the show in Tests. In nine matches (15 innings), he slammed 608 runs at 40.53. He slammed three tons and a fifty. Notably, he slammed three successive 50-plus scores in the Border-Gavaskar Trophy against India, racking up 89 in Perth, 140 in Adelaide, and 152 in Brisbane. Altogether, Head smashed 1399 runs across formats at 42.39. He was the top scorer amongst the Aussies.

WANINDU HASARANGA (SRI LANKA)

Sri Lanka's Wanindu Hasaranga was a champion performer in white-ball cricket in 2024. He was the highest wicket-taker among Full Member nations in T20Is, taking 38 scalps from 20 matches at just 14.28. His economy rate was 7.11. His tally included two four-fers. In 14 of the 20 matches, he took two-plus wickets to showcase his consistency. Sri Lanka enjoyed successes against Zimbabwe, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and West Indies in bilateral series as Hasaranga was a consistent force. Hasaranga is one of the contenders for the ICC Men's T20I Player of the Year award. Hasaranga also finished as the top wicket-taker in ODI cricket. In 10 matches, he claimed 26 scalps at 15.61. His ER was 5.36. He took three four-wicket hauls and a fifer. His best performance was 7/19. He finished 2024 as the 2nd-highest wicket-taker behind Bumrah. He took 64 scalps at 14.82. His ER was 6.24.

PRESENTING THE TEST TEAM OF THE YEAR 2024

Yashasvi Jaiswal finished the year as the 2nd-highest run-scorer. The Indian opener played 15 Tests and amassed 1394 runs at the time of writing. His average read 53.61. He clobbered three tons and 8 fifties. He had a poor start against South Africa before bossing the show against England...

BY CT CONTRIBUTOR

2024 was a year where fans witnessed enthralling Test cricket on offer. With the ICC World Test Championship 2023-25 cycle that ruled the game, several teams made their presence felt in a bid to make it to the final next year. South Africa booked their berth in the final, with Australia, India, and Sri Lanka vying for the 2nd spot. Moreover, individual performances also took centerstage as teams rode on these performances to create quality cricket. England and India played the most number of matches. What stood out was some shocks, like Bangladesh defeating Pakistan and India being thrashed at home by New Zealand. Here, we decode the Test Team of the Year.

YASHASVI JAISWAL (INDIA)

Yashasvi Jaiswal finished the year as the 2nd-highest run-scorer. The Indian opener played 15 Tests and amassed 1394 runs at the time of writing. His average read 53.61. He clobbered three tons and 8 fifties. He had a poor start against South Africa before bossing the show against England at home. He showed his hunger for big scores, smashing two double centuries alongside three fifties in the 5-match series. He also hit three fifties in the series against Bangladesh. An ordinary series followed against New Zealand, where he scored one fifty in the 3-0 defeat. Jaiswal showed he can be an able performer in away

Tests. He scored a sensational 161 versus Australia in Perth and an 82 in the 4th Test at the MCG.

KANE WILLIAMSON (NEW ZEALAND)

Kane Williamson, who missed the India series owing to an injury, featured in 9 Tests and bagged 1018 runs at 59.58. His tally included 4 tons and 4 fifties. In a record-breaking year, Williamson went past 9000 Test runs (9276). He also raced to 33 Test tons and surpassed 1000 career fours. Williamson struck three centuries in a two-match Test series against the Proteas, showing remarkable appetite. He smashed one fifty each versus Australia and Sri Lanka. He did an able job in his side's 2-1 series defeat to England, scoring two fifties and a ton.

JOE ROOT (ENGLAND)

The record scorer of the World Test Championship, Joe Root, remains the best batter in the Fab Four. He was simply unstoppable in 2024, finishing as the top scorer. In 17 matches, Root smashed 1556 runs at 55.57. His tally included six tons and 5 fifties. After a slow start versus India in the first three Tests, Root struck an unbeaten 122 in Ranchi and followed that up with an 84-run knock in Dharamsala. He struck three fifty-plus scores in the series against West Indies and Sri Lanka at home. The 262-run knock in Multan against Pakistan was brilliant. His 106-run effort in the 2nd Test against New Zealand was another testament to his prowess in scoring runs everywhere. The year saw him break Alastair Cook's record as the top scorer of England in Tests. Root also became England's

highest centurion.

KAMINDU MENDIS (SRI LANKA)

Kamindu Mendis is one of the reasons why Sri Lanka are still alive in the WTC. In nine matches (16 innings), Mendis smashed 1049 runs at 74.92. His tally included 5 tons and three fifties, with the best of 182*. He started the year with two successive tons and a score of 92* versus Bangladesh away. In the three-Test series against England away, he hit three fifty-plus scores. He decimated New Zealand next at home with two Test centuries. The South Africa series was damper by his standards. He got a crucial 48 and 35 in the 2nd Test after faltering in the 1st.

TEMBA BAVUMA (SOUTH AFRICA)

Temba Bavuma had his challenges in the form of injuries and was limited to just 5 Test matches in 2024. However, the Proteas captain led from the front and delivered the goods, helping his side reach the WTC final. He delivered the goods in 8 of the 10 Test innings he batted in. His performance against Sri Lanka at home, in particular, was noteworthy. He slammed 70, 113, 78 and 66 in the two-Test series. In the Centurion Test versus Pakistan, his knocks of 31 and 40 had a lot of influence. Bavuma scored 503 runs at 55.88, hammering one ton and 4 fifties.

JAMIE SMITH (ENGLAND)

The wicketkeeper batter was one of the standout performers among newcomers in Tests. Smith played nine matches in 2024 and scored an impressive 637 runs at 42.46. He struck one ton and fifties. His strike rate of 72.30 was commendable. He hammered a fifty in his debut innings versus West Indies. He also smashed a commendable 95-run knock in the 3rd Test of the series. His first century arrived in the series against Sri Lanka. He hit a fifty as well. Notably, he slammed a solid 89 against Pakistan in the third Test held at Rawalpindi.

RAVINDRA JADEJA (INDIA)

The Indian all-rounder had another successful year in Tests. In 12 matches, he picked 48 scalps at 24.29. His tally included one four-fer and three five-wicket hauls. Jadeja claimed 19 wickets in the series against England at home. He also picked 9 scalps against Bangladesh and 16 wickets against New Zealand. In the 4th Test

against Australia at the MCG, he picked 4 scalps. Jadeja also hammered 500-plus runs in 2024. He struck one century and three fifties.

GUS ATKINSON (ENGLAND)

Gus Atkinson deserves an award for the Outstanding Breakthrough Player of the Year. The Englishman had a solid entry to Test cricket and made his name. He started by claiming the 3rd-best match figures by any bowler in Test debut. He picked 12/106 against the West Indies at Lord's. He finished with 22 scalps in the 3-match series. He made an impression next against Sri Lanka at home. He also featured against Pakistan away and New Zealand away. Atkinson finished 2024 with 52 wickets at 22.15. He claimed three five-wicket hauls. With the bat, he also hammered a ton, scoring 352 runs.

JOSH HAZLEWOOD (AUSTRALIA)

If Australia make it to the WTC final, they will thank Josh Hazlewood, who claimed an impressive 35 scalps at just 13.60 from 7 Tests. Unfortunately, he was ruled out of the India Test series midway. He claimed two fifers and three four-wicket hauls. The 33-year-old, who owns 279 Test scalps, impressed against Pakistan, West Indies, New Zealand and the first match against India in Perth.

JASPRIT BUMRAH (INDIA)

Jasprit Bumrah finished as the highest wicket-taker in 2024. His consistency and brilliance made him reach newer heights. At the time of writing, Bumrah owned 70 wickets from 13 Tests at 15.12. He claimed four five-wicket hauls and five four-wicket hauls. Notably, he managed 29 scalps in the first four Tests against Australia in the Border-Gavaskar Trophy. Bumrah made history in the 4th Test at MCG when he became the fastest Indian pacer to 200 scalps.

KAGISO RABADA (SOUTH AFRICA)

The South African fast bowler was the most successful pacer in his side. Rabada played 8 Tests in 2024 and claimed a solid 34 scalps at 19.94. He managed two five-wicket hauls with the best of 6/46. Notably, Rabada helped SA reach the final with a stellar 31*-run effort in a two-wicket victory over Pakistan in Centurion. He added an unbeaten 51-run stand alongside Marco Jansen. ■

2024 YEAR-ENDER: PRESENTING THE T20I TEAM OF THE YEAR

Travis Head was solid in 2024. His 539 runs at an average of 38.5 are the second-best ever for an Australian in a calendar year. His strike rate was a sensational 178.47. He started the year with impressive knocks against New Zealand, and after a dream IPL...

BY CT CONTRIBUTOR

2024 saw a lot of action when it came to T20Is. This was the year of the ICC T20 World Cup held in the USA and West Indies respectively. India won their 2nd T20 World Cup after beating South Africa in the final. India also dominated the format this year, winning almost everything. There were strong performers like Australia and Sri Lanka, too. In terms of individual performances, several players made their presence felt as the year progressed. Here, we decode the T20I Team of the Year.

TRAVIS HEAD (AUSTRALIA)

Travis Head was solid in 2024. His 539 runs at an average of 38.5 are the second-best ever for an Australian in a calendar year. His strike rate was a sensational 178.47. He started the year with impressive knocks against New Zealand, and after a dream IPL 2024 season, he carried that form into the T20 World Cup 2024. He was the third-highest run-getter in the event, scoring 255 runs at a strike rate of 158.38. He also impressed with a knock of 76 off 43 versus India. He hit one fifty each in the bilateral series against Scotland and England, respectively.

KUSAL MENDIS (SRI LANKA)

The Sri Lankan experienced wicketkeeper batter did a reasonable job in T20Is this year. In 21 matches, he scored 618 runs at 30.90. He hit three fifties with the best of 86. After failing to capitalise on his starts in the bilateral series against Zimbabwe and Afghanistan, Mendis was at his best versus Bangladesh. After the T20 World Cup, He hit two 40-plus scores against India and then hit an unbeaten 68 against West Indies at home. He slammed 46 versus New Zealand in the recently concluded 1st T20I.

BABAR AZAM (PAKISTAN)

In what was a mixed year for Pakistan in T20Is, Babar Azam slammed six fifties and smashed close to a hundred boundaries. He smashed 738 runs from 24 matches at 33.54. Babar was Pakistan's mainstay as he improved his strike rate to 133.21. Babar is one of the contenders to win the ICC Men's T20I Player of the Year award.

SANJU SAMSON (INDIA)

Sanju Samson has cemented his place in India's T20I squad and, most importantly, as an opener. In 13 matches, he scored a terrific 436 runs at 43.60. He struck at 180.16. He hammered a staggering three centuries, helping India break records in those games. He also struck a fifty. Samson smashed 31 sixes as well.

SURYAKUMAR YADAV (INDIA)

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Kajaria
INDIA
Dialog

His superhuman catch in the T20 World Cup final was the turning point in India's win. Suryakumar Yadav once again proved to be a crucial factor for India's dominance in T20Is. In 18 matches, he scored 429 runs at 26.81 with the help of 4 fifties. He struck at 151.59. He hit crucial fifties against USA and Afghanistan in the T20 World Cup. This was followed by knocks of 31 and 47 against England and Australia in the global event. He also slammed one fifty each in the bilateral series against Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. Suryakumar, who was appointed Indian captain post the T20 WC, helped India win against South Africa as well.

SIKANDAR RAZA (ZIMBABWE)

Sikandar Raza made it to the prestigious shortlist for the ICC T20I Player of the Year nominations for the third year in a row. The all-rounder was instrumental in Zimbabwe's unbeaten run in the ICC Men's T20 World Cup sub-regional Africa Qualifier Group B. He smashed 199 runs and picked up 10 wickets. Zimbabwe enjoyed wins over Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Afghanistan under Raza's leadership this year. He scored 573 runs from 24 matches at 28.65. With the ball, he claimed 24 scalps at 22-plus.

RASHID KHAN (AFGHANISTAN)

Rashid Khan did well for the Afghans, picking 31 scalps in just 14 matches. His average of 9.58 was a standout, alongside a terrific economy rate of 5.60. The wrist-spinner took four four-wicket hauls. Rashid also shone for Afghanistan in the T20 World Cup 2024. He picked 14 scalps at 12.78 and had an ER of 6.17.

WANINDU HASARANGA (SRI LANKA)

Wanindu Hasranga is one of the contenders for the ICC Men's T20I Player of the Year award. The Sri Lankan bowling all-rounder had a tremendous year, taking 36 scalps from 19 matches at just 14.30 at the

time of writing. He took two four-fers. His economy rate was 7.11. In 13 of the 19 matches, he took two-plus wickets to showcase his consistency. Sri Lanka enjoyed successes against Zimbabwe, Afghanistan, Bangladesh and West Indies in bilateral series as Hasaranga was a consistent force.

ADAM ZAMPA (AUSTRALIA)

Australia had a strong 2024 in T20Is, beating the West Indies, New Zealand, Scotland and Pakistan in bilateral series. They also drew a three-match series against England. One of their main performers was Adam Zampa. The leg-spinner took an impressive 35 scalps from 21 matches at 17.20. He took two four-fers. Notably, Zampa went on to become the 1st Aussie bowler with 100-plus scalps in T20Is this year. He owns 117 scalps at just 21.

SHAHEEN AFRIDI (PAKISTAN)

Shaheen Afridi stood tall for Pakistan, finishing as their top wicket-taker with 36 scalps from 23 matches at 18.58. Pakistan had a difficult 2024 as they lost series against England, Australia and South Africa. They beat Ireland and Zimbabwe in addition to drawing 2-2 versus New Zealand. Afridi was one of the consistent performers, though, and he produced several crucial spells. He also reached a milestone of 100 T20I wickets for Pakistan this year.

ARSHDEEP SINGH (INDIA)

Arshdeep Singh has grown in stature as India's primary pacer in the T20I format. Arshdeep shone in 2024, picking up 36 scalps at just 13.50. His economy rate was 7.49 from 18 games. Arshdeep, who played a key role in helping India win the 2024 T20 World Cup, was the tournament's joint-highest wicket-taker with 17 scalps at 12.64. Arshdeep is India's most successful pacer in T20Is, with 95 scalps. He has been nominated for the ICC Men's T20I Player of the Year award. ■

FEATURE

2024 YEAR-ENDER: PRESENTING THE ODI TEAM OF THE YEAR

Saim Ayub will be one of the players to watch out for in the Champions Trophy. The Pakistan cricket team opener had a majestic ODI series against South Africa recently, helping his side blank the hosts 3-0. Ayub has cemented his place in this Pakistan...

TCL
PEPSI
PAKISTAN
50 Runs

BY CT CONTRIBUTOR

As the year 2024 comes to a close, One Day Internationals in men's cricket have a presence. Several players, especially from Asia, showed their mettle. With the ICC Champions Trophy in 2025, it was a solid exercise for the sides to test their assets and have a look at players. However, the likes of Sri Lanka and West Indies won't be seen at the Champions Trophy. Notably, several Lankan players impressed largely this year. Among the players selected, Charith Asalanka leads the side.

Here, we look at the ODI Team of the Year.

PATHUM NISSANKA (SRI LANKA)

Pathum Nissanka takes the cake as one of the openers in this side. The Sri Lankan maestro played only 12 matches and racked up an extraordinary 694 runs at 63.09. He also struck at 106.44. His exploits included three tons and two fifties. Notably, Nissanka hammered a double-century, which came back in February against Afghanistan in Pallekele. Overall, the right-handed batter owns a tally of 2422 runs at 43.25. He has six tons and 15 fifties. He hit the most fours this year (86), as per ESPNcricinfo.

SAIM AYUB (PAKISTAN)

Saim Ayub will be one of the players to watch out for in the Champions Trophy. The Pakistan cricket team opener had a majestic ODI series against South Africa recently, helping his side blank the hosts 3-0. Ayub has cemented his place in this Pakistan side and looks well drilled. In nine matches, he scored 515 runs at 64.37. His tally included three tons and a fifty. Two of his tons came on Proteas soil.

KUSAL MENDIS (SRI LANKA)

Experienced Sri Lankan wicketkeeper batter Kusal Mendis is set to end the year as the top scorer in ODIs. Mendis accumulated a total of 742 runs from 17 matches at 53. In addition to a ton, he clocked six fifties. Mendis showed consistency and had only six scores below 20 and one below 10. He ended Sri Lanka's ODI journey strongly with three successive 50-plus scores. He was sensational against New Zealand, hammering 143 and 74* in November 2024. Overall, Mendis has scored 4251 runs at 32.56.

KEACY CARTY (WEST INDIES)

Keacy Karty had an impressive 2024 for the West

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Indies. In 12 matches (11 innings), Carey scored 560 runs at 62.22. He slammed one ton and three fifties. He started the year with a superb 88 versus Australia. After failing against Sri Lanka, Carty then flexed his muscles in a three-match series against England at home, scoring 19*, 71 and 128*. He also impressed in the home series against Bangladesh earlier in December. His exploits helped him reach 1000 ODI runs at 43.47.

HEINRICH KLAASEN (SOUTH AFRICA)

South African stalwart Heinrich Klaasen featured in just three ODIs this year. The occasion came in December as South Africa played a three-match series against Pakistan. South Africa lost the series 3-0, but Klaasen made his presence felt with three defining fifties. In these three matches, he clobbered 264 runs at 88. His strike rate of 123-plus was praiseworthy. His best score was 97. The 33-year-old is closing in on 2000 ODI runs. He owns 1987 runs at 43.19. His strike rate is 116-plus.

CHARITH ASALANKA (SRI LANKA)

Sri Lanka's Charith Asalanka was an able voice for his side, with 605 runs in the middle order. He averaged 50.41 with the help of 1 ton and four fifties. He owned a decent strike rate of 97.11. Atalanta started the year with a neat 101 versus Zimbabwe in a three-match series. He remained unbeaten in all three games against Afghanistan next. He also proved his worth against Bangladesh and West Indies. Atalanta owns 2165 runs in ODIs at 42.45.

AZMATULLAH OMARZAI (AFGHANISTAN)

Afghanistan's Azmatullah Omarzai deserves the ODI Performer Of the Year award with his sensational all-round exploits. He was Afghanistan's 2nd-highest run-scorer with 417 runs at 52.12. He smashed one ton and three fifties from 14 matches (12 innings). His aggressive style meant he owned a strike rate of 100-plus. Omarzai finished as his side's 2nd-highest wicket-taker. He managed 17 scalps at a terrific 20.47. He managed two four-fers.

WANINDU HASARANGA (SRI LANKA)

Wanindu Hasaranga finishes 2024 as the highest

wicket-taker. The spin maestro played in just 10 ODIs but went on to claim a total of 26 wickets for his side at 15.61. His tally included three four-wicket hauls and a fifer. Back in January 2024, he played a solitary ODI against Zimbabwe and picked 7/19 from 5.5 overs. He was also consistent against Afghanistan, Bangladesh and West Indies. Overall, he has 93 scalps from 58 matches.

RASHID KHAN (AFGHANISTAN)

Wrist-spinner Rashid Khan, who nursed an injury for quite some time, made a comeback. He featured in just eight matches and bowled in six innings. He started his campaign versus South Africa in September in UAE, claiming 7 scalps which included a fifer. He was amongst the wickets in the three-match series against Bangladesh and was also economical. Finally, he wrapped up his ODI campaign by bowling in the 3rd ODI against Zimbabwe, taking a three-wicket haul. Rashid, who owns 198 wickets in ODIs, finished 2024 with 15 scalps at 12.46.

ALLAH GHAZANFAR (AFGHANISTAN)

The young Afghan spinner, who will be seen in the Indian Premier League 2025 season, was a stellar act and perhaps also the find of 2024 (ODIs). Ghazanfar played 11 ODIs for Afghanistan and finished with 21 scalps. He averaged a stellar 13.57 and took two fifers. He made his ODI debut in 2024 itself. He went wicketless in his first two ODIs versus Ireland before taking a three-fer versus South Africa. He finished the series vs Bangladesh with 8 scalps that included a six-for. In the just concluded ODI series against Zimbabwe, he picked nine scalps from three games.

SHAHEEN AFRIDI (PAKISTAN)

Left-arm pacer Shaheen Afridi caps off the ODI Team of the Year. Shaheen played just six ODIs this year but churned out wickets, taking 15 scalps at 17.60. His tally included one four-fer. Overall, Shaheen owns 119 wickets from 59 ODIs at 23.14. He featured in two high-profile series against Australia and South Africa, helping Pakistan win both. Versus the Aussies, he stood tall with eight scalps. Another 7 wickets came against the Proteas. ■

THE WORST XI OF 2024: PLAYERS WHO FELL SHORT OF EXPECTATIONS

The "King" had one of his worst years in international cricket. Virat Kohli's 2024 stats are a stark departure from his legendary standards: 22 matches, 614 runs at an average of 22, with just one century and two fifties...

BY SHIUBAM GHOSH

In cricket, every season brings its fair share of heroes and heartbreaks. While some players rise to the occasion, others struggle under the weight of expectations. The year 2024 saw many stars falter, with their performances falling well below the lofty standards they've set in the past. Whether it was inconsistency, poor form, or the pressure of leadership, these players couldn't find their rhythm, leaving fans and teams disappointed. The "Worst XI of 2024" isn't just a collection of underwhelming statistics—it's a stark reminder that even the best can have off years. This team features players from across the cricketing world, including once-reliable batters, bowlers, and all-rounders who failed to make an impact. As we look back at their struggles, it's a chance to reflect on the unpredictable nature of the game—and to anticipate their potential comebacks in 2025.

1. ZAKIR HASAN (BANGLADESH)

Once touted as Bangladesh's next big thing, Zakir Hasan’s performance in Test cricket this year was underwhelming. In 8 matches, he managed a mere 239 runs, averaging a disappointing 19.92. Despite a solitary century, his inability to provide consistent runs at the top left Bangladesh reeling in critical moments. His performances were emblematic of Bangladesh’s broader struggles in the longer format, as they often found themselves chasing the game due to a fragile top order.

2. QUINTON DE KOCK (SOUTH AFRICA)

The South African wicketkeeper-batter had a surprisingly forgettable year in T20Is. In 12 matches, he accumulated 307 runs at an average of just 25.58, far below his usual standards. Known for his aggressive starts, de Kock seemed to lose his rhythm in 2024, often leaving South Africa in trouble during the powerplay. His inability to convert starts into substantial scores compounded his woes, leaving fans wondering what went wrong.

3. STEVE SMITH (AUSTRALIA)

Steve Smith is a name synonymous with Test cricket excellence, but 2024 told a different story. Across 27 innings, Smith managed only 658 runs at an average of 25.30, with just one century and one fifty in 8 matches. This was a far cry from the prolific batsman we’re accustomed to. His struggles highlighted Australia’s batting woes in a year where they failed to dominate as they have in the past.

4. VIRAT KOHLI (INDIA)

The “King” had one of his worst years in international cricket. Virat Kohli’s 2024 stats are a stark departure from his legendary standards: 22 matches, 614 runs at an average of 22, with just one century and two fifties. His struggles spanned all three formats, and his lack of consistency raised questions about his form and fitness. For fans used to seeing Kohli dominate bowlers worldwide, 2024 was a tough pill to swallow.

5. BABAR AZAM (PAKISTAN)

The year started with high hopes for Babar Azam, but it ended with him being benched from Pakistan’s Test team. In 34 matches across formats, Babar scored 1,114 runs at an average of 32.76, with eight fifties and no centuries. While he fared decently in ODIs, amassing 738 runs in 24 matches, his performances in Tests

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were dismal, leading to his omission. His leadership also came under scrutiny as Pakistan struggled to find consistency under his captaincy.

6. NAJMUL HOSSAIN SHANTO (CAPTAIN, BANGLADESH)

Najmul Hossain Shanto, leading Bangladesh across formats, endured a year to forget. In 34 matches, he scored 961 runs at an average of 25. His numbers in Tests were particularly poor, with 317 runs in 8 matches at an average of just 21. As captain, Shanto failed to inspire confidence with either the bat or his leadership, making him a deserving captain of this "Worst XI."

7. SAM CURRAN (ENGLAND)

The most disappointing all-rounder of 2024, Sam Curran, had a year to forget. Nearly going unsold in the IPL was a sign of his diminishing impact. In 15 IPL matches, Curran scored only 228 runs and took a paltry 5 wickets, leaking runs at an economy of 10. His performances in international cricket were similarly uninspiring, leaving England's management with tough questions about his role in the side.

8. OBED MCCOY (WEST INDIES)

West Indies' Obed McCoy struggled as a frontline seamer in T20s this year. Despite picking up 11 wickets in 11 matches, his economy rate of nearly 10 made him a liability. With batters targeting him in crucial overs, McCoy's inability to contain runs or deliver breakthroughs meant he often left his team in precarious situations.

9. GERALD COETZEE (SOUTH AFRICA)

Gerald Coetzee showed promise in 2024 but failed to

deliver consistent performances. In 7 matches across formats, he managed only 10 wickets, failing to live up to the expectations as South Africa's emerging pace prospect. His lack of wickets in critical moments and inability to adapt to different conditions made him a disappointing inclusion in the playing XI.

10. JOFRA ARCHER (ENGLAND)

Jofra Archer's much-anticipated comeback to cricket in 2024 didn't pan out as expected. Representing England in white-ball cricket, Archer picked up 22 wickets in 20 matches, which, by his standards, was underwhelming. His pace and accuracy seemed to have dipped, leaving many questioning if he could return to his previous world-class form.

11. ABRAR AHMED (PAKISTAN)

Abrar Ahmed burst onto the scene as a mystery spinner but failed to maintain his momentum in 2024. Across 13 matches, he picked up 20 wickets, with most of his success coming in T20s. His performances in Tests were particularly poor, leading to him being dropped from the red-ball team. Fans and selectors expected much more from the talented spinner, making his inclusion in this list justified.

CONCLUSION

Cricket is a game of highs and lows, and 2024 was a stark reminder that even the best players can have off years. For these 11 cricketers, the year was a struggle, with poor form, injuries, and inconsistency defining their performances. As they look to bounce back in 2025, fans and teams will hope these players rediscover their magic and return to their best. After all, cricket is a game of comebacks, and every player in this "Worst XI" has the talent to turn things around. ■

OPINION

WHY THE CURRENT INDIAN CRICKET TEAM SUPPORT STAFF IS UNDER THE SCANNER

Virat Kohli, the backbone of India's batting, has been dismissed six times in eight innings to deliveries pitched on the sixth stump outside off. This is not a case of being beaten by unplayable deliveries; it's a failure to adapt and learn. Kohli's insistence on chasing balls, which he should leave alone, highlights his technical...

BY CT CONTRIBUTOR

The Indian cricket team has historically thrived under cohesive leadership, a vision, and robust support staff. Yet, as of now, these elements seem to have fallen apart following the departure of Rahul Dravid as head coach. The 2024 T20 World Cup victory under Dravid was a high point, but his exit marked a turning point for Indian cricket. Gautam Gambhir, celebrated for his IPL success with Kolkata Knight Riders (KKR), took over as head coach alongside a revamped support staff. This group, including Morne Morkel (bowling coach), Abhishek Nayar (assistant coach), Ryan ten Doeschate (assistant coach), and T Dilip (fielding coach), was expected to usher in a new era of dominance.

Fast-forward to the ongoing Border-Gavaskar Trophy (BGT), and India finds itself trailing 2-1 after four matches. Performances so lackluster raise serious questions about the competence of this coaching unit. Losses are inevitable in sports, but it is unacceptable how India has capitulated, celebrated mediocrity, and failed to address glaring issues.

GAUTAM GAMBHIR: A MISSTEP IN LEADERSHIP?

Gautam Gambhir's appointment as head coach came with a sense of optimism. His IPL success and aggressive mindset aligned with what Indian cricket needed post-Dravid. However, international cricket demands more than tactical nous; it requires man-management skills, adaptability, and an ability to inspire players to perform under pressure. Unfortunately, Gambhir's tenure has been marred by questionable decisions and an apparent inability to address critical issues. His celebrated aggression has translated into reckless decision-making rather than effectively channeling India's talent pool. For instance, celebrating enforcing a follow-on, despite eventually losing the match, epitomizes a lack of tactical awareness. Gambhir's focus on short-term milestones rather than long-term objectives has left the team in disarray.

A BATTING UNIT IN DISARRAY

India's batting, once the cornerstone of its success, has been woeful in the current series. The repeated dismissals of key players speak volumes about the lack of proper guidance.

VIRAT KOHLI: A TALE OF PREDICTABILITY

Virat Kohli, the backbone of India's batting, has been dismissed six times in eight innings to deliveries pitched on the sixth stump outside off. This is not a case of being beaten by unplayable deliveries; it's a failure to adapt and learn. Kohli's insistence on chasing balls, which he should leave alone, highlights his technical shortcomings and the lack of intervention from the coaching staff. A competent batting coach would have addressed this flaw after the first few dismissals, yet it continues haunting India.

SHUBMAN GILL: WASTED TALENT

Shubman Gill hailed as India's next batting superstar, has looked far from his best. His inability to apply himself in challenging situations is alarming. While talent is evident, temperament and adaptability are sorely missing. Rather than nurturing him, the coaching staff manages him with kid gloves, robbing him of the opportunity to grow into a reliable match-winner.

WHERE IS THE BATTING COACH?

The absence of a dedicated batting coach is glaring. Instead of fine-tuning techniques and addressing mental aspects of the game, the current support staff appears more interested in superficial management. Abhishek Nayar and Ryan ten Doeschate, who share coaching responsibilities, seem out of their depth at the international level. Their inability to offer meaningful solutions to technical flaws hurts India's chances.

BOWLING: A ONE-MAN ARMY

The bowling department, led by Morne Morkel, has been equally disappointing, except for Jasprit Bumrah. The fast-bowling ace has taken 30 wickets in the series so far, almost single-handedly keeping India in contention. Beyond Bumrah, however, the bowling unit looks pedestrian.

LACK OF PENETRATION

Morkel, himself a celebrated fast bowler, has failed to instill the same incisiveness in his protégés. Mohammed Siraj, Mohammed Shami, and others have struggled to find consistency, often bowling without a clear plan. India's spinners, once a formidable force, appear toothless on pitches that traditionally suit them. This lack of penetration is not just a reflection of the players' form but also the inability of the bowling coach to extract the best from them.

FIELDING: SLOPPY AND UNINSPIRED

T Dilip, the fielding coach, has overseen a significant drop in India's fielding standards. Dropped catches, missed run-out opportunities, and lethargic efforts in the outfield have become commonplace. These lapses not only cost matches but also erode the team's confidence.

CELEBRATING MEDIOCRITY

One of the most damning aspects of this support staff is their penchant for celebrating mediocrity. Enforcing a follow-on against Australia in the second Test, only to lose the match, was inexplicably celebrated as a moral victory. This mindset reflects a lack of ambition and an acceptance of subpar performances. International

cricket demands a winning mentality, something this coaching unit has failed to instill.

THE WAY FORWARD

Indian cricket cannot afford to languish in mediocrity. The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) must thoroughly review the current support staff and their methods. Here's what needs to change:

1. APPOINT SPECIALIZED COACHES

India's batting woes demand a dedicated batting coach who can work closely with players to address technical and mental aspects. Similarly, the bowling and fielding coaches must be held accountable for their departments.

2. EMPHASIZE ACCOUNTABILITY

The support staff must be held accountable for the team's performance, including results and how players prepare and execute their roles.

3. FOSTER A WINNING CULTURE

Celebrating follow-ons and moral victories must be replaced with a relentless pursuit of excellence. Players and staff alike must embrace a culture of winning and continuous improvement.

4. DEVELOP BENCH STRENGTH

India's abundant talent pool is being wasted due to poor management. The coaching staff must identify and nurture young talent, ensuring they are ready to step up when required. The current support staff of the Indian cricket team, led by Gautam Gambhir, has failed to live up to expectations. Their inability to address critical issues, coupled with a lack of vision and Accountability, has left Indian cricket in a precarious position. Without significant changes, the team risks squandering its immense potential and falling behind in the global cricketing landscape.

It's time for the BCCI to take decisive action and restore India's dominance in world cricket. The players and fans deserve better. ■

FEATURE

INDIA'S TRANSITION PHASE IN TEST CRICKET: THE NEED FOR NEW HEROES

Tanmay Agarwal's performances in the ongoing Ranji Trophy have been exemplary. With over 600 runs at an average of 68.33, Agarwal has consistently delivered big scores. His calm temperament and solid technique make him well-suited for the challenging conditions in England, where patience and adaptability are key...

BY CT CONTRIBUTOR

As India gears up for their first Test series of 2025—a demanding five-match tour of England—the team finds itself in the throes of a significant transition. With legends like Ravichandran Ashwin retired and stalwarts such as Rohit Sharma, Virat Kohli, Rishabh Pant, and Mohammed Siraj either retired or facing fitness concerns, the Indian Test side is searching for its next set of match-winners. The need to rebuild the team with younger, in-form players is more pressing than ever.

Sunil Gavaskar's suggestion to keep an eye on talents like Venkatesh Iyer, who brings all-round capabilities and experience in English conditions, indicates the direction Indian cricket might take. But beyond Iyer, several other names have earned their place in the spotlight due to their stellar performances in domestic red-ball tournaments like the Ranji Trophy. Here, we focus on five such players—Tanmay Agarwal, Shubham Sharma, Himanshu Mantri, Harsh Dubey, and Auqib Nabi—who have made an undeniable case for inclusion in the England series.

1. TANMAY AGARWAL: THE DEPENDABLE RUN MACHINE

STATS	RUNS SCORED	INNINGS	AVERAGE
	615	9	68.33

WHY HE MUST PLAY

Tanmay Agarwal's performances in the ongoing Ranji Trophy have been exemplary. With over 600 runs at an average of 68.33, Agarwal has consistently delivered big scores. His calm temperament and solid technique make him well-suited for the challenging conditions in England, where patience and adaptability are key.

India's struggles at the top of the order during overseas tours have been recurring, with openers often failing to set a strong foundation. Agarwal's ability to occupy the crease and negate the new ball can be a game-changer in seaming English conditions. His recent performances indicate a readiness to take on the world's best bowlers and contribute significantly to the team's cause.

2. SHUBHAM SHARMA: THE MIDDLE-ORDER POWERHOUSE

STATS	RUNS SCORED	INNINGS	AVERAGE
	605	8	100.83

WHY HE MUST PLAY

Shubham Sharma's incredible average of 100.83 in the Ranji Trophy highlights his knack for converting starts into match-defining innings. His ability to dominate spinners and handle pace effectively makes him a valuable asset in the middle order, a position India has struggled to solidify in recent years.

With Kohli and Rahane in the twilight of their

careers, India needs someone who can shoulder the responsibility of anchoring the innings and accelerating when required. Sharma's ability to play long innings, coupled with his aggressive stroke play, can provide the stability and firepower that India requires in the middle overs, particularly against England's potent bowling attack.

3. HIMANSHU MANTRI: THE ALL-ROUND WICKETKEEPING OPTION

WHY HE MUST PLAY

Himanshu Mantri has emerged as one of the most reliable wicketkeepers in domestic cricket. He offers stability behind the stumps and contributes with the bat. His ability to adapt to different situations and contribute lower down the order makes him a strong candidate for the wicketkeeping role in Rishabh Pant's absence.

Mantri's safe hands and quick reflexes will be crucial in England, where keeping against swing and seam can be particularly challenging. Additionally, his potential to play crucial knocks in pressure situations adds depth to India's batting lineup, a factor that cannot be overlooked when playing in hostile conditions.

4. HARSH DUBEY: THE SPIN WIZARD

STATS	WICKET TAKEN	AVERAGE	BEST BOWLING FIGURES
	605	8	100.83

WHY HE MUST PLAY

With Ravichandran Ashwin retired, India desperately needs a quality spinner who can exploit the conditions when the ball begins to turn. With 37 wickets at an astounding average of 14.91, Harsh Dubey has proven his mettle as a match-winner for Vidarbha in the Ranji Trophy.

Dubey's ability to extract turn and bounce and his knack for taking wickets at crucial moments make him a strong contender for the spin-bowling role. While English conditions may not traditionally favour spinners, having someone like Dubey in the squad ensures that India has an attacking option to exploit the rough created by fast bowlers.

5. AUQIB NABI: THE PACE SENSATION

STATS	WICKET TAKEN	AVERAGE	BEST BOWLING FIGURES
	32	11.75	10/74

WHY HE MUST PLAY

India's fast-bowling arsenal has been one of its strengths in recent years, but with Mohammed Siraj's

fitness in question, the team needs a fresh face to lead the attack. Auqib Nabi, with his ability to swing the ball both ways and maintain a tight line and length, is the ideal candidate.

Nabi's performances in the Ranji Trophy, where he has taken 32 wickets at a jaw-dropping average of 11.75, underline his potential to succeed at the highest level. His ability to bowl long spells and pick wickets consistently will be crucial in England, where the ball tends to move throughout the day.

THE BIGGER PICTURE: WHY THESE PLAYERS MATTER

India's tour of England is not just another Test series; it's a litmus test for the team's ability to adapt and rebuild. With key players from the previous generation stepping aside, the onus is on the next wave of talent to take up the mantle. Through their performances in domestic cricket, these five players have shown they have the skills, temperament, and hunger required to succeed internationally.

1. ADAPTING TO ENGLISH CONDITIONS:

Each player has displayed a strong understanding of their roles and an ability to adapt, which will be critical in England's challenging conditions.

2. FILLING THE LEADERSHIP VOID:

With experienced players like Rohit and Kohli no longer in the side, players like Shubham Sharma and Tanmay Agarwal can bring a fresh perspective and lead by example through their performances.

3. STRENGTHENING THE BOWLING ATTACK:

Including Harsh Dubey and Auqib Nabi ensures that India has a balanced bowling attack capable of taking 20 wickets in any conditions.

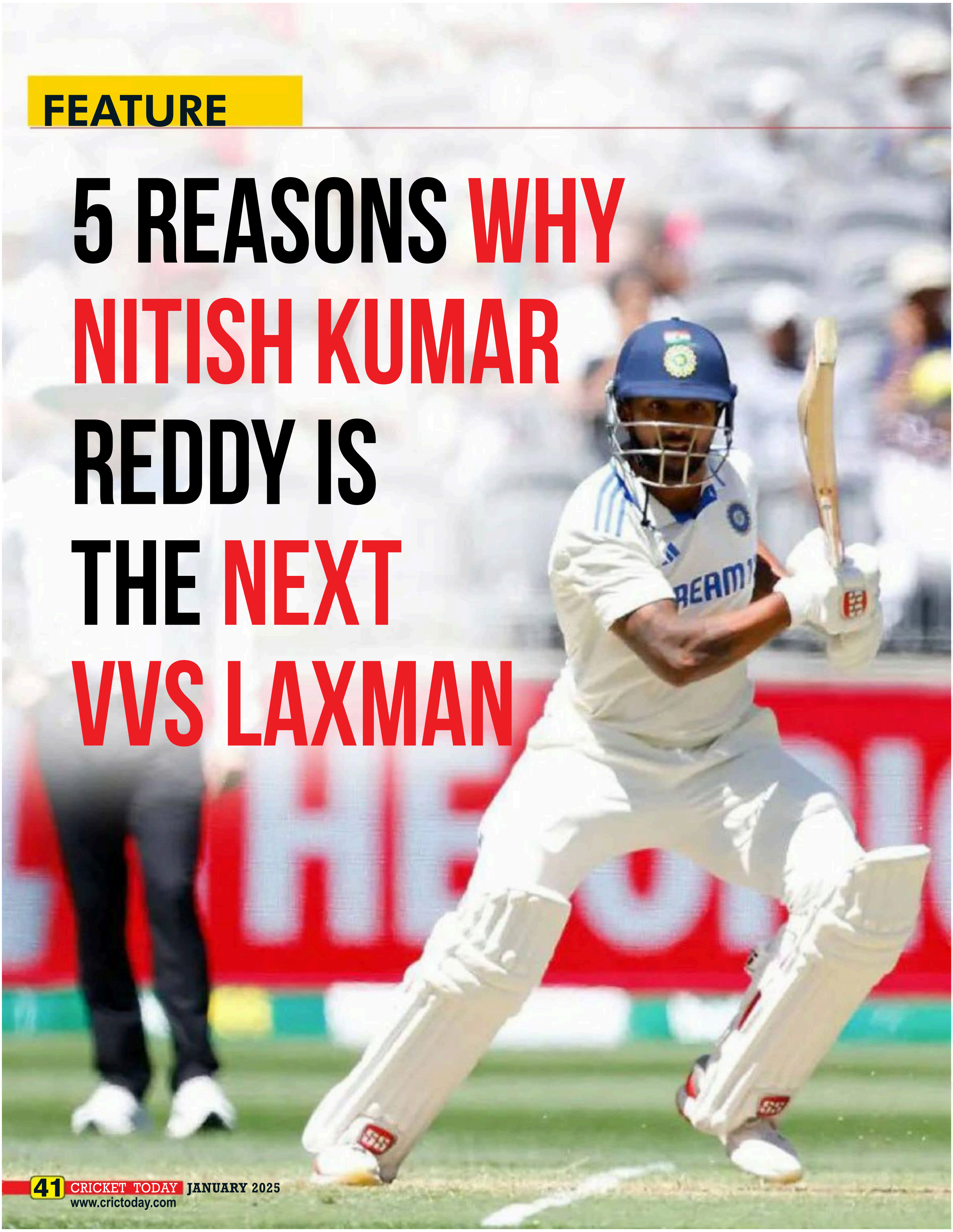
4. LONG-TERM INVESTMENTS:

Backing these players for the England series is not just about short-term success. It's about building a core group that can serve Indian cricket for years.

India's transition phase in Test cricket presents a unique opportunity to invest in young and promising talent. Players like Tanmay Agarwal, Shubham Sharma, Himanshu Mantri, Harsh Dubey, and Auqib Nabi have earned their place through hard work and consistent performances. Including them in the England series is not just a necessity—it's a step toward shaping the future of Indian cricket. If given the chance, these players have the potential to not only fill the void left by their predecessors but also carve their legacies in the annals of Indian cricket. ■

FEATURE

5 REASONS WHY NITISH KUMAR REDDY IS THE NEXT VVS LAXMAN



One of VVS Laxman's most celebrated traits was his ability to stand firm under pressure, often rescuing India from precarious situations. Nitish Kumar Reddy has displayed similar reliability in his nascent career. In the IPL, Reddy's contributions often came when the team needed them...

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BY CT CONTRIBUTOR

In cricket, comparisons between players often highlight shared qualities that define greatness. Nitish Kumar Reddy's rise to prominence in 2024 has drawn parallels to the legendary VVS Laxman, known for his artistry, composure, and clutch performances. Reddy's journey has been nothing short of remarkable. After a stellar IPL season with Sunrisers Hyderabad, where he scored 303 runs in 15 matches, Reddy showcased his ability to adapt to the demands of high-pressure games. His transition to international cricket was seamless, with standout performances in the T20I series against Bangladesh. However, it was his gritty Boxing Day century in Melbourne that cemented his reputation as a player for the big stage. Facing a fierce Australian attack, Reddy's poise and technique shone through. Here are five compelling reasons why Nitish Kumar Reddy could be cricket's next VVS Laxman.

1. LAXMAN-LIKE DEPENDABILITY

One of VVS Laxman's most celebrated traits was his ability to stand firm under pressure, often rescuing India from precarious situations. Nitish Kumar Reddy has displayed similar reliability in his nascent career. In the IPL, Reddy's contributions often came when the team needed them most, exhibiting his ability to anchor innings and provide stability. His adaptability to varying match situations, combined with his temperament, mirrors Laxman's knack for thriving in adversity. Reddy's century on Boxing Day exemplifies this quality. Facing a potent Australian attack on a lively pitch, he showcased remarkable composure and discipline. Just as Laxman's iconic 281 in Kolkata redefined India's resilience, Reddy's Melbourne knock demonstrated his capacity to shoulder responsibility and inspire confidence in his team.

2. IMPECCABLE TECHNIQUE

VVS Laxman's technique was a hallmark of his batting, characterized by silken drives and deft wristwork. Similarly, Nitish Kumar Reddy

possesses a technically sound game, marked by fluent strokeplay and a strong defense. His ability to play both pace and spin with equal ease is reminiscent of Laxman's versatility. Reddy's IPL season was a testament to his technical prowess. Whether it was negotiating swing in the powerplay or executing precise strokes against spinners in the middle overs, he displayed an all-round game that few young players possess. In Tests, his backfoot punches and crisp on-drives evoke memories of Laxman's elegance. Reddy's technique is not just pleasing to the eye but also effective, enabling him to excel across formats and conditions.

3. IN-GAME ACUMEN

Cricketing intelligence separates good players from great ones, and pundits are already lauding Nitish Kumar Reddy's cricketing brain. Much like Laxman, Reddy's ability to read the game and adapt his approach accordingly is a standout feature of his play. He has shown a keen understanding of when to accelerate, when to consolidate, and how to construct partnerships. In the T20I series against Bangladesh, Reddy's innings were characterized by smart shot selection and an intuitive grasp of field placements. His ability to rotate strike while keeping the scoreboard ticking underscores his awareness and adaptability. Such qualities are invaluable in pressure situations, a hallmark of Laxman's career. Reddy's intuitive approach to batting and game management suggests a maturity beyond his years.

4. RESILIENCE UNDER PRESSURE

Few players in cricket history embodied resilience better than VVS Laxman. Known for thriving in challenging circumstances, Laxman's grit inspired countless comebacks for India. Nitish Kumar Reddy's early career indicates a similar mental toughness. His Boxing Day century is a prime example. After a shaky start to the innings, Reddy battled against a hostile

Australian bowling attack, showcasing immense patience and grit. Despite wickets tumbling at the other end, he maintained his focus, shepherding the lower order and steering India to a respectable position. This ability to withstand pressure and deliver in crunch moments echoes Laxman's legacy as a crisis man.

5. VERSATILITY ACROSS BATTING POSITIONS

One of VVS Laxman's underrated attributes was his flexibility. Whether batting at number three, five, or six, Laxman's adaptability made him a vital cog in India's batting lineup. Nitish Kumar Reddy has already shown similar versatility, thriving in diverse roles across formats. In the IPL, Reddy demonstrated his ability to accelerate as a finisher while also playing anchor roles when required. In the T20Is against Bangladesh, he batted in various positions, adapting his approach seamlessly. His Test debut at number six was a masterclass in building an innings from the middle order. This adaptability allows team management to utilize him in multiple capacities, much like they did with Laxman.

Nitish Kumar Reddy's journey from IPL star to international cricketer has been nothing short of remarkable. With his dependability, impeccable technique, cricketing acumen, resilience, and versatility, he embodies many traits that define VVS Laxman's illustrious career. While it is still early days for Reddy, his potential to become one of India's most reliable batsmen is evident.

As fans, we often look for the next great player who can uphold the legacy of legends. In Nitish Kumar Reddy, Indian cricket may have found the torchbearer for Laxman's legacy, a player capable of delivering when it matters most and delighting fans with his artistry and determination. The parallels are clear, and the future looks bright for this emerging star. ■

FEATURE

5 INDIANS WHO SHOULDN'T TRAVEL TO ENGLAND: A BOLD TAKE AHEAD OF THE JUNE TOUR

The name Virat Kohli is synonymous with greatness,but even legends have their slumps. While Kohli has shown glimpses of brilliance, his overall Test form this year leaves much to be desired. In nine matches, he has managed just one century and a single half-century...

BY CT CONTRIBUTOR

As India prepares for their next international assignment in England this June, the cricketing world is buzzing with excitement and anticipation. With the ongoing Border-Gavaskar Trophy evenly poised at 1-1 and two Tests left, the spotlight has already started shifting to what the team composition might look like for the crucial away series. However, the transition from subcontinental pitches to English conditions requires a specific skill set, and not all players currently in the mix are suited to the task.

Here's a look at five Indian players who, based on current form and suitability, should not make the trip to England.

1. VIRAT KOHLI: A SHADOW OF HIS FORMER SELF

The name Virat Kohli is synonymous with greatness, but even legends have their slumps. While Kohli has shown glimpses of brilliance, his overall Test form this year leaves much to be desired. In nine matches, he has managed just one century and a single half-century. His performance in the ongoing series against Australia has been particularly underwhelming, with 126 runs in five innings. Notably, 100 of those runs came in the first Test, highlighting a stark inconsistency.

In English conditions, where the ball swings prodigiously, Kohli's tendency to flirt with deliveries outside the off-stump could spell disaster. His struggles in the 2014 tour of England are a haunting reminder, and though he redeemed himself in 2018, his current form doesn't inspire confidence. Perhaps a break could rejuvenate him for future challenges.

2. ROHIT SHARMA: TIME TO HAND OVER THE BATON

Rohit Sharma's captaincy has been commendable in home conditions, but his inability to translate that form into impactful performances overseas is a glaring issue. In the current Border-Gavaskar Trophy, Rohit

has amassed a mere 19 runs across two matches, underlining his struggles against quality bowling attacks in unfamiliar conditions.

Moreover, England's swinging conditions are likely to expose Rohit's vulnerability against the moving ball, as seen in previous tours. With Jasprit Bumrah set to return from injury, it might be time to pass the captaincy mantle to the fiery pacer, who has shown promise as a leader in limited opportunities. Rohit staying back could also allow younger talents to take center stage and gain invaluable experience in tough overseas conditions.

3. DEVDUTT PADIKKAL: THE SAI SUDHARSAN CONUNDRUM

When Devdutt Padikkal was brought in as a replacement for Shubman Gill, many viewed it as an investment in potential. However, his performances haven't justified the faith shown in him. While Padikkal is a technically sound batsman, his lack of exposure to the rigours of Test cricket and overseas challenges has been evident.

Enter Sai Sudharsan, a promising young talent with the temperament and technique to succeed in England. Sudharsan's ability to adapt quickly and his stellar performances in domestic cricket make him a strong contender for the spot. It's time for Padikkal to focus on honing his skills back home while allowing Sudharsan to seize the opportunity.

4. PRASIDH KRISHNA: FREEING UP SPACE FOR POTENT PACERS

Prasidh Krishna has shown glimpses of his potential as a fast bowler, but England's seaming tracks demand more than just raw pace. The Indian pace battery is brimming with talent, and players like Mohammed Siraj, Shardul Thakur, and a fit-again Jasprit Bumrah offer a more balanced attack for English conditions. Prasidh's inclusion in the squad could mean a bench role, which does little for his development or the team's composition. Instead, India should focus on players who can make an immediate impact. Prasidh staying back would free up a valuable spot for someone who can contribute effectively in swinging conditions.

5. SARFARAZ KHAN: A CASE OF

MISMANAGED OPPORTUNITIES

Sarfaraz Khan has been a standout performer in domestic cricket, amassing runs with remarkable consistency. However, his inability to find a place in the playing XI during the Australia series raises questions about his readiness for overseas tours. Sarfaraz's lack of international exposure and the decision not to field him earlier in the year has put him in a tough spot.

England is no place for experimentation, and players must be well-prepared to tackle the challenges posed by the Dukes ball. While Sarfaraz has the talent, throwing him into the deep end in England might do more harm than good. A more measured approach, focusing on grooming him for future tours, would be a better course of action.

WHAT'S AT STAKE FOR INDIA?

The tour of England is more than just another bilateral series—it's a chance for India to assert their dominance in away conditions and build momentum for future ICC events. The selection decisions leading up to the series will play a pivotal role in determining the outcome. With a mix of seasoned campaigners and young blood, the team must strike the right balance to succeed. By leaving behind players who are either out of form or unsuited to the conditions, India can ensure a more competitive and cohesive unit takes the field. Tough decisions today could pave the way for long-term success.

CONCLUSION

Cricket is as much about strategy as it is about skill, and team selection plays a crucial role in achieving the desired results. While the players mentioned above have contributed significantly to Indian cricket in various ways, their inclusion in the squad for the England tour might not serve the team's best interests at this juncture.

As the cricketing fraternity eagerly awaits the squad announcement, one thing is clear: India's success in England will hinge on picking the right players for the job. Whether the selectors make bold choices or stick to the tried-and-tested formula remains to be seen, but the road to June promises to be an exciting one for Indian cricket. ■

5 PLAYERS TO WATCH OUT FOR IN ICC CHAMPIONS TROPHY 2025

Jasprit Bumrah is currently in the form of his life, making him India's biggest hope for glory in the ICC Champions Trophy 2025. Fresh off his heroics in the ICC T20 World Cup, where his match-winning spells secured India's triumph, Bumrah has carried his form into red-ball cricket...

BY CT CONTRIBUTOR

The 2025 ICC Champions Trophy promises to be an electrifying event, with Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates hosting the top eight cricketing nations. The tournament will run from February 19 to March 9, marking the return of one of cricket's most anticipated global competitions. Pakistan, the defending champions from 2017, will aim to retain their title, but the competition will be fierce. The tournament's unique format ensures that every match is a high-stakes battle. Fans are already buzzing about the players who could light up the tournament. From young stars to seasoned veterans, some cricketers are poised to become the defining figures of this edition. Here, we take a closer look at five players who are expected to dominate the 2025 ICC Champions Trophy.

DREAM11
INDIA

JASPRIT BUMRAH (INDIA)

Jasprit Bumrah is currently in the form of his life, making him India's biggest hope for glory in the ICC Champions Trophy 2025. Fresh off his heroics in the ICC T20 World Cup, where his match-winning spells secured India's triumph, Bumrah has carried his form into red-ball cricket. His performances in the Border-Gavaskar Trophy 2024-25 were nothing short of extraordinary, claiming 30 wickets in just 8 innings against a formidable Australian lineup. With Mohammed Shami's participation in doubt and Mohammed Siraj's inconsistency, India's bowling attack heavily relies on Bumrah. In 89 ODIs, Bumrah has taken 149 wickets, showcasing his ability to deliver under pressure. This tournament is also an opportunity for redemption, as he aims to erase memories of the 2017 ICC Champions Trophy final, where India fell short. With his lethal yorkers, unplayable bouncers, and unmatched composure, Bumrah will be India's talisman in Pakistan and the UAE.

JACOB DUFFY (NEW ZEALAND)

Jacob Duffy has emerged as New Zealand's new bowling spearhead following the retirement of legends Tim Southee and Trent Boult. The 30-year-old seamer has been patiently waiting for his turn, and his recent performances suggest he's ready to lead the Kiwis' attack. In a recent T20I series against Sri Lanka, Duffy showcased his prowess by taking seven wickets in just two matches, reaffirming his capability to thrive under pressure. In ODIs, Duffy has played eight matches and claimed 14 wickets, proving his mettle in limited-overs cricket. Known for his ability to swing the ball both ways and his knack for striking in crucial moments, Duffy adds a new dimension to New Zealand's bowling lineup. With the Champions Trophy likely to feature conditions conducive to swing and seam, Duffy's skills will make him a potent weapon for the Black Caps.

SAIM AYUB (PAKISTAN)

At just 22 years old, Saim Ayub is already being hailed as the next big star in Pakistani cricket. The young left-handed batter has taken the cricketing world by storm with his stellar performances in international cricket. In just nine ODIs, he has amassed 515 runs at an astonishing average of 64.4, including a century in South Africa and impressive contributions in Australia. With the Champions Trophy being held on home soil, Ayub will be a critical player for the defending champions. Ayub's fearless batting and ability to anchor innings make him a key asset for Pakistan. His adaptability across different conditions and match situations set him apart as a world-class talent. As Pakistan looks to defend their crown, Ayub's form and temperament will be crucial to their success. The young prodigy is well on his way to becoming a household name in cricket.

PATHUM NISSANKA (SRI LANKA)

Pathum Nissanka represents Sri Lanka's hopes of reclaiming glory on the international stage. The 26-year-old opener has already established himself as a dependable performer, amassing 2,422 runs in 61 ODIs at an average of 40. His record includes six centuries and 15 half-centuries, underscoring his consistency and ability to convert starts into significant scores.Nissanka's calm demeanour and technical proficiency make him a reliable anchor at the top of the order. With Sri Lanka eager to end their title drought, his role will be pivotal. The Champions Trophy's high-pressure environment will test his mettle, but Nissanka's proven ability to rise to the occasion makes him a player to watch. His performances could be the catalyst for a Sri Lankan resurgence in global cricket.

ALLAH GHAZANFAR (AFGHANISTAN)

Allah Ghazanfar is the name on everyone's lips as Afghanistan gears up for their debut in the ICC Champions Trophy. Tipped as the next big thing in Afghan cricket, the young spinner has already made waves with his performances. In 11 ODIs, Ghazanfar has claimed 21 wickets at an economy rate just above four, showcasing his exceptional control and wicket-taking ability. Ghazanfar's recent selection by the Mumbai Indians in the IPL has further boosted his profile, highlighting his potential to become a global superstar. Paired with Rashid Khan, he forms a formidable spin duo that could trouble any batting lineup. Afghanistan's success in the Champions Trophy will hinge on their bowlers, and Ghazanfar's contributions will be instrumental. His ability to handle pressure and deliver on the big stage makes him a player to watch.

The ICC Champions Trophy 2025 is shaping up to be a thrilling spectacle, with a mix of established stars and emerging talents set to take center stage. Jasprit Bumrah, Jacob Duffy, Saim Ayub, Pathum Nissanka, and Allah Ghazanfar are five players who could leave an indelible mark on the tournament. Their performances will not only determine the fate of their respective teams but also shape the narrative of this prestigious competition. As the cricketing world eagerly awaits the action, these players stand ready to shine on the grand stage.

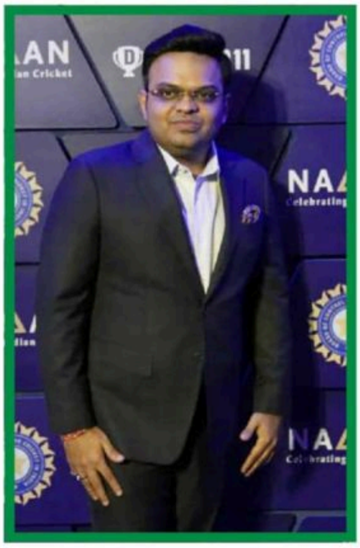
PAKISTAN CRICKETERS TO FACE ARCH-RIVAL INDIA IN DUBAI

The tournament begins in Karachi on Feb. 19 when Pakistan takes on New Zealand. Political tensions between Pakistan and India have prevented their teams from touring each other's country since 2012, when Pakistan went to India for a bilateral one-day international series...

INDIA
PAKISTAN

BY CT CONTRIBUTOR

Pakistan will take on arch-rival India in the marquee group game of the 2025 Champions Trophy in Dubai on Feb. 23 after the ICC finally announced the schedule for the cricket showpiece event. India has refused to travel to Pakistan over security concerns and that forced the ICC to delay its announcement for more than a month. Pakistan is to host a minimum of 10 games in Rawalpindi, Karachi and Lahore. India is to play its three Group A matches against Bangladesh, Pakistan and New Zealand in Dubai. If India qualifies for the semifinals and the final, those games will also be staged in Dubai.



"The ICC is delighted to release the schedule ... marking the tournament's much-anticipated first return since 2017," ICC chair Jay Shah said in a statement. "The thrilling competition, in which eight teams battle it out to claim the iconic white jackets, will provide fans with 15 matches of unmissable entertainment.

"This edition will take place in Pakistan and the UAE, and with Dubai also serving as the home of the ICC headquarters, it represents an opportunity to showcase the best of cricket with heritage and modernity."

Afghanistan, Australia, England and South Africa will play all their Group B games in Pakistan. Defending champion Pakistan is hosting its first global cricket event since 1996. After long deliberations between the ICC Board members, the game's governing body has also agreed that Pakistan will not play in India in the 2024-27 cycle. It is a tit-for-tat response to India's refusal to travel to Pakistan for the Champions Trophy. That means Pakistan will go to a neutral venue when India hosts the 2025 women's World Cup and co-hosts the 2026 men's T20 World Cup with Sri Lanka. As compensation for not hosting India at the Champions Trophy, the ICC awarded the 2028 women's T20 World Cup to Pakistan.

"We are pleased that an agreement has been reached based on the principles of equality and respect, showcasing the spirit of cooperation and collaboration that defines our sport," PCB chairman Mohsin Naqvi said.

"Our heartfelt gratitude goes out to the ICC members who played a constructive role in helping us achieve a mutually beneficial solution. Their efforts have been invaluable in promoting the interests of international cricket."

Naqvi said that hosting the Champions Trophy "is a significant milestone for Pakistan, highlighting our commitment to promoting cricket at the highest level and showcasing our capabilities as a premier event organizer. We are dedicated to ensuring that this tournament will be a memorable experience for players, officials and fans alike."

The tournament begins in Karachi on Feb. 19 when Pakistan takes on New Zealand. Political tensions between Pakistan and India have prevented their teams from touring each other's country since 2012, when Pakistan went to India for a bilateral one-day international series. Both teams face each other regularly in ICC tournaments — Pakistan went to India last year for the men's World Cup. But before that event, India refused to travel to Pakistan for the Asia Cup and played all its games in Sri Lanka. The PCB has spent millions of dollars on the upgrade of stadiums in Lahore, Karachi and Rawalpindi and hopes the work will be completed by mid-January.

SCHEDULE

Feb 19: Pakistan v New Zealand, National Stadium, Karachi
Feb 20: Bangladesh v India, Dubai International Cricket Stadium, Dubai
Feb 21: Afghanistan v South Africa, National Stadium, Karachi
Feb 22: Australia v England, Gaddafi Stadium, Lahore
Feb 23: Pakistan v India, Dubai International Cricket Stadium, Dubai
Feb 24: Bangladesh v New Zealand, Rawalpindi Cricket Stadium, Rawalpindi
Feb 25: Australia v South Africa, Rawalpindi Cricket Stadium, Rawalpindi
Feb 26: Afghanistan v England, Gaddafi Stadium, Lahore
Feb 27: Pakistan v Bangladesh, Rawalpindi Cricket Stadium, Rawalpindi
Feb 28: Afghanistan v Australia, Gaddafi Stadium, Lahore
Mar 1: South Africa v England, National Stadium, Karachi
Mar 2: New Zealand v India, Dubai International Cricket Stadium, Dubai
Mar 4: Semifinal 1: Dubai International Cricket Stadium, Dubai
Mar 5: Semifinal 2: Gaddafi Stadium, Lahore
Mar 9: Final: Gaddafi Stadium, Lahore

*Semi-final 1 will involve India if it qualifies
**Semi-final 2 will involve Pakistan if it qualifies
***If India qualifies for the final it will be played in Dubai. ■

TOP STORIES

“But you cannot ask me if the old City is back. If you saw the game, we are not”

- Pep Guardiola on two consecutive wins in EPL

“I know exactly what I’m grateful for: being alive”

- Michail Antonio on surviving car crash

CHELSEA DEFENDER COULD MISS REST OF THE SEASON

Chelsea defender Wesley Fofana's season could be over because of a hamstring injury. The 24-year-old Frenchman, who missed the entire 2023-24 campaign after ACL surgery, hasn't played since Dec. 1 when he was substituted out of the 3-0 win over Aston Villa. Blues manager Enzo Maresca said that Fofana's injury was worse than initially feared and that the center back will be out “for a very long time." There was no immediate plan for surgery. “He could be out for the season,” Maresca said. “We don’t know exactly if for the entire season, but unfortunately he could be out for part of the season." Fofana became one of the most expensive defenders in soccer history when he joined Chelsea in the summer of 2022 from Leicester for a fee of 75 million pounds ($93 million).

MAN UNITED TO TRIGGER CONTRACT EXTENSION

Manchester United will trigger a one-year extension to Harry Maguire's contract to keep the defender at Old Trafford until the end of the 2025-26 season, manager Ruben Amorim said. Maguire's deal had been due to expire at the end of this season. Amorim confirmed the club's decision at a news conference, saying: “I spoke with him this morning and I told him he has to improve on the pitch, we need him a lot. “Also, he has to improve as a leader. We all know the situation that he had here but we need him a lot in this moment, so we are going to trigger, happily, the option for him.” The 31-year-old Maguire joined United from Leicester in 2019 and was captain for a time before losing it to Bruno Fernandes.

BREAST CANCER DIAGNOSIS

Former U.S. Open women's doubles champion Gabriela Dabrowski revealed she had played through 2024 after undergoing treatment for breast cancer. She delayed part of that treatment so she could compete at Wimbledon where she reached the doubles final. "I know this will come as a shock to many, but I am OK and I will be OK," the 32-year-old Canadian said on social media. "Early detection saves lives. I can wholeheartedly agree with this." Dabrowski, ranked third in women's doubles, said in an Instagram post that she received the diagnosis in April. She did not play that month and in May because of surgery, but returned to the courts in June. Dabrowski said she had found a first lump in the second half of 2023 and was initially told not to worry about it. Dabrowski and Routliffe won the WTA Finals at the end of this season. The pair also won the U.S. women's doubles title in 2023.

WAYNE ROONEY FIRED

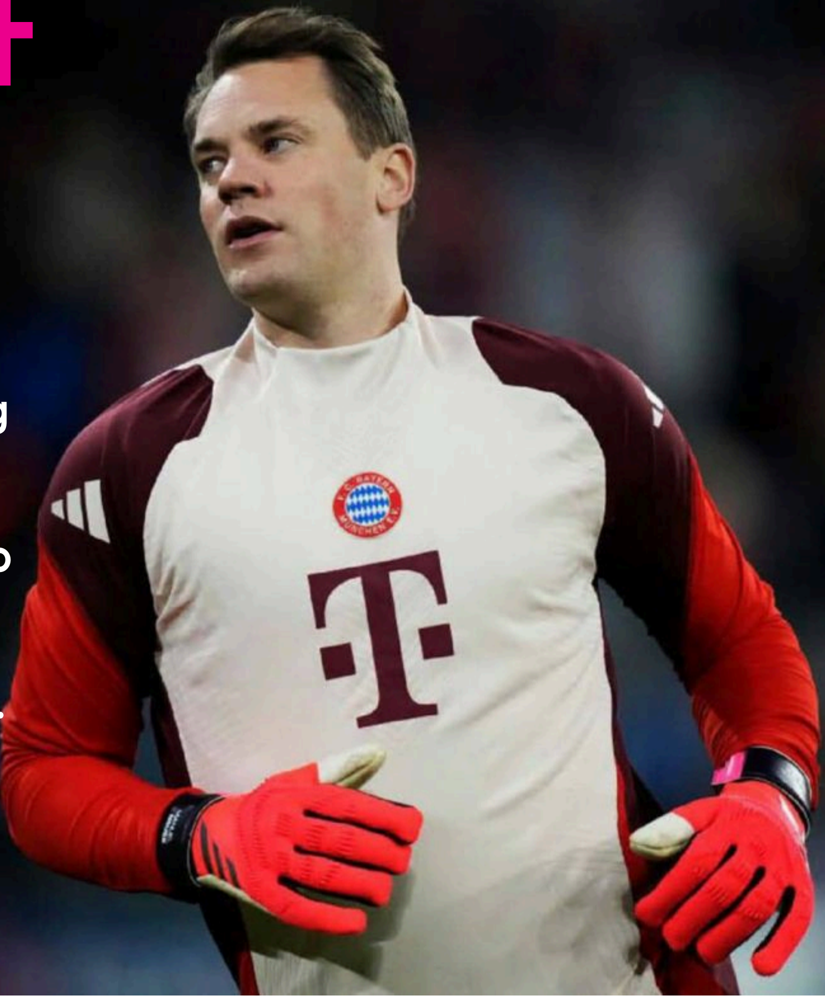
Wayne Rooney was fired as Plymouth Argyle coach after just seven months in charge of the struggling Championship team. The 39-year-old former England and Manchester United striker was hired in May and departs with Plymouth last in the English second tier with four wins in 23 games this season. His final game was a 2-0 loss to Oxford United which extended Argyle's winless run to nine games. "Plymouth Argyle can confirm that the club and head coach Wayne Rooney have mutually agreed to part ways with immediate effect," the club said in a statement. "We would like to thank Wayne and his team for all their efforts and wish them well for the future." Rooney took charge at Plymouth following an 83-day tenure at Birmingham.

BOTTAS RETURNS TO MERCEDES

Valtteri Bottas will return to Mercedes as its reserve driver for next year, the Formula 1 team said. Bottas won 10 races over five seasons at Mercedes as Lewis Hamilton's teammate from 2017-21. He did not score a point this season with Sauber and the team replaced him and Zhou Guanyu with a new lineup of the experienced Nico Hulkenberg and Brazilian newcomer Gabriel Bortoleto, ahead of rebranding as the Audi works team in 2026. Bottas' return to Mercedes was made possible after Mick Schumacher, son of seven-time champion Michael Schumacher, moved on from his Mercedes reserve driver role after two years. "I'm happy to finally answer the question I've posed over the past month," the 35-year-old Finn said.

UBS
PETRONAS
CROWDSTRIKE
Hewlett Packard Enterprise

IS MANUEL NEUER TOO OLD? BAYERN MUNICH GOALKEEPER FACING EXTRA SCRUTINY BECAUSE OF HIS AGE



Neuer still enjoys the full confidence of Bayern's powerbrokers, with sporting director Max Eberl saying the club and player were making progress on talks to extend his contract. "Now there are only the last details to clear," Eberl said. But the club also needs to think of a future without Neuer, sooner or later...

BY STAFF WRITER

Bayern Munich goalkeeper Manuel Neuer isn't getting any younger and his age is prompting a debate about his performances. The 38-year-old Neuer was sent off for the first time in his long career on Dec. 3 when Bayern was knocked out of the German Cup by defending champion Bayer Leverkusen. He was also at fault during Bayern's first loss of the season, 1-0 at Aston Villa in the Champions League on Oct. 2.

Neuer still enjoys the full confidence of Bayern's powerbrokers, with sporting director Max Eberl saying the club and player were making progress on talks to extend his contract. "Now there are only the last details to clear," Eberl said. But the club also needs to think of a future without Neuer, sooner or later.

Bayern has been linked with a move for Cologne goalkeeper Jonas Urbig, 21, while Alexander Nübel, 28, is still biding his time at Stuttgart. Nübel is a Bayern player who has been loaned out to Monaco and now Stuttgart because Neuer was always first choice at Bayern.

Nübel will battle with Barcelona 'keeper Marc-André ter Stegen for the position as Germany No. 1 since Neuer announced his international retirement in August. Israel goalkeeper Daniel Peretz replaced Neuer after his sending off against Leverkusen and has retained his place in the goal while Neuer is out with a broken rib.

"He probably won't play again this year," coach Vincent Kompany said. It means Neuer will miss Bayern's suddenly important game against Leipzig on Friday. Bayern lost its first Bundesliga game of the season 2-1 at Mainz last weekend and will be looking to bounce back with a positive performance to avoid any uncertainties creeping in over the winter break.

Another loss could allow defending champion Leverkusen to cut Bayern's lead to just a point if it beats visiting Freiburg on Saturday. Leverkusen is buoyant after seven straight wins across all competitions. Neuer is expected to make a full recovery from his rib injury and could return when the league resumes on Jan. 11 at Borussia Mönchengladbach.

Two years ago, Neuer broke his leg while skiing after the 2022 World Cup. He returned nearly a year later in October 2023 and showed no lasting ill effects from the injury. But Bayern ended the season without winning a trophy for the first time since 2012. Leverkusen dominated the Bundesliga, and Bayern lost to eventual champion Real Madrid in the semifinals of the Champions League.

Bayern had Neuer to thank for keeping his team in the game with terrific saves in the second leg of the semifinal in Madrid – until he dropped an easy ball for Joselu to score a late winner. "A mistake he wouldn't make in another 100 years," said then-Bayern coach Thomas Tuchel, who said Neuer "had been exceptional in saving us all night." At 38 — Neuer will be 39 in March — every mistake prompts a fresh round of scrutiny. ■

OLEKSANDR USYK SUCCESSFULLY DEFENDS HEAVYWEIGHT BELT

In the second half of the fight, it became apparent that carrying the extra weight was wearing Fury down, as the pace began to catch up to him while Usyk's calm and patient approach favored him. Usyk's ability to get inside, strike quick and damage Fury with stinging combinations was the...

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BY STAFF WRITER

Oleksandr Usyk remained undefeated when he successfully defended his heavyweight titles with a unanimous decision over Tyson Fury in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Judges Gerardo Martinez, Patrick Morley and Ignacio Robles had identical scorecards in favor of Usyk, 116-112. Usyk landed 179-of-423 (42%) punches thrown, while Fury (34-2-1, 24 KOs) landed just 144 of the 509 punches he threw, a 28% clip. Asked if he agreed with judges scores, Usyk implied that it's not his place to question, only to box.

"I win, it's good," said Usyk (23-0, 14 KOs). "Not my deal. I win. Thank you, God." In the closing betting numbers from BetMGM, Usyk closed -145 and Fury was +110. The highly anticipated rematch from a May bout in which saw Fury suffered his first loss lived up to the hype from the moment the boxers entered the arena. Per a report on ESPN, Usyk's team requested the Middle East Professional Boxing Commission during Friday's rules meeting to mandate that Fury trim his beard ahead of their unified heavyweight championship rematch. He had a beard as burly as Santa Claus less than a week before Christmas, but the 36-year-old sauntered in unshaven and donning a bright red Christmas-themed robe with Mariah Carey's "All I Want for Christmas Is You" accompanying his walk to the ring.

After Fury opened the fight with a rather quick pace and controlled the first two rounds, Usyk responded in the third and fourth rounds by working the body while slipping in occasional power combinations to the head. Fury landed several big shots in the fifth round, but Usyk's left hand was the story in the sixth, staggering his bigger and taller opponent twice.

In the second half of the fight, it became apparent that carrying the extra weight was wearing Fury down, as the pace began to catch up to him while Usyk's calm and patient approach favored him. Usyk's ability to get inside, strike quick and damage Fury with stinging combinations was the difference. Feeling the pressure, a spirited Fury came out swinging in the 10th, bullying Usyk throughout the round. Usyk held him off at times with a steady jab, while an uppercut from Fury scored late. Usyk's speed came to life in the 11th, again, landing blistering combinations to Fury's head to keep him at bay. The two traded flurries of punches in the final round, Fury hoping to make one final impression on the judges while Usyk was looking for an exclamation point.

Turki Alalshikh, the chairman of Saudi Arabia's General Entertainment Authority, announced on X (formerly Twitter) earlier in the week that an experimental AI judge would also return results. The innovative virtual system has Usyk winning, 118-112. Fury is now 5-1 in rematches. Only three belts were on the line this time after the IBF stripped Usyk for not facing its mandatory challenger, Daniel Dubois. Dubois interrupted Usyk's postfight interview, snatched the microphone and demanded a rematch from their fight on Aug. 26, 2023. Usyk won by knockout in the ninth round. "I want my revenge Usyk," Dubois said. "Well done tonight, but I want my revenge." Usyk obliged by telling the powers that be in attendance, "Your Excellency, make me fight with Daniel. Thank you so much."

In other action on the card: Serhii Bohachuk defeated Ismael Davis with a sixth-round TKO. Johnny Fisher defeated Dave Allen with a split decision (95-94, 93-96, 95-94). Lee McGregor defeated Isaac Lowe via unanimous decision (96-92, 97-91, 97-91). Peter McGrail outpointed Rhys Edwards with a unanimous decision (96-95, 96-94, 96-94). ■

FIFA'S NEW SUPER-SIZED TOURNAMENT SPARKS A REVOLT

The new Club World Cup is a supersized version of what used to be a short tournament with only seven teams. The new edition includes 32 teams from around the world and will be held every four years, starting next summer in the United States...

BY CT CONTRIBUTOR

One of the most striking moments of soccer in 2024 was when Rodri hobbled onto a stage in Paris on crutches to receive the prestigious Ballon d'Or for best male player of the year. The Manchester City and Spain midfielder had been one of the most outspoken critics against the increasingly congested soccer calendar, warning that the lack of downtime was detrimental to players' performance and health. Then, just a month before the Oct. 28 award ceremony, he tore his ACL during a seemingly routine run in a Premier League game against Arsenal. Though such injuries have occurred throughout the history of the sport and aren't necessarily linked to overplaying, Rodri's season-ending injury became a visual representation of the physical toll of modern soccer at a time when the busy match schedule is facing legal challenges and the possibility of strike action. Top footballers are now routinely playing more than 60 games per season for club and country, while the game is getting faster and more intense. Injuries are on the rise. Already pushed to their limits, some players say FIFA's newly expanded Club World Cup, to be held in the United States next year, is the last straw.

Players say they are "at breaking point, that they are at the limit, that it's actually too much," Alexander Bielefeld, from global players' union FIFPRO, told The Associated Press.

FIFA'S NEW ADDITION TO THE CALENDAR

The new Club World Cup is a supersized version of what used to be a short tournament with only seven teams. The new edition includes 32 teams from around the world and will be held every four years, starting next summer in the United States from June 14 to July 13. As its name suggests, it's envisioned to be club version of the World Cup for national teams. That means top players will have a monthlong tournament on top of their domestic league season three out of every four years. With more games also added to the Champions League in Europe this season as well as the next World Cup in 2026, the soccer calendar is filling up quickly.

"It's something that worries us because we are the guys who suffer," Rodri said in September, just days before he was injured. He said players may have no choice but to refuse to play if the trend continues.

HE'S NOT THE ONLY ONE FEELING FRUSTRATED.

In a post on X last year, Raphael Varane, a member of France's World Cup winning squad in 2018, said the schedule was putting players' physical and mental well-being at risk.

"Why are our opinions not being heard?" asked the 31-year-old Varane, who retired from the national team two years ago and from playing altogether in September this year following an injury.

In July, England and Real Madrid midfielder Jude Bellingham described the schedule as "crazy."

"It's difficult on the body — mentally and physically you are exhausted," he said after England was runner-up at the European Championship.

FIFPRO says a significant number of players routinely play 60-70 matches a season. The union's recommended limit is 55.

Last season Julian Alvarez played 75 games for former club Manchester City and Argentina in 10 different competitions spanning the Premier League, Champions League, Copa America and Olympics. The season before, Manchester United midfielder Bruno Fernandes played 70 times, including a run of 20 consecutive games.

INJURIES ARE A GROWING CONCERN

The Men's European Football Injury Index, an annual report by global insurance broker Howden, found there were 4,123 injuries in the top divisions of England, Spain, Germany, Italy and France last season. It said the number of injuries had risen year-on-year since the index was first published in 2021 and that "it would be fair to expect a continuation of this upwards trajectory."

Tony Strudwick, medical director for West Bromwich Albion and former head of performance for Manchester United, said injuries are on the rise despite advancements in sports science and medicine.

"That to me looks like there's a mismatch between what the players can physically tolerate and what they've been exposed to," he told The AP. "During the last eight seasons, incidents of hamstring injuries, in particular, have increased."

Strudwick said the risk of too many games was ultimately injury and burnout. But he said players are unlikely to raise the issue with their clubs or national teams.

"Players are very reluctant to say they don't want to play and they're very, very tired. It takes a relatively brave person to do that," he said.

Manchester City played 61 games in the 2022-23

Snapdragon

campaign when it won a trophy treble of the Premier League, Champions League and FA Cup. This season that number could rise to 71 because of an expanded group stage and potential playoff in the Champions League and the Club World Cup. A heavy workload is also an issue in women's soccer, FIFPRO said earlier this week, though it noted that while some top players have a packed schedule, others don't get to play enough.

FIFA HITS BACK AT ITS CRITICS

If successful, the Club World Cup could rival the Premier League and Champions League as one of the most lucrative and watched tournaments in club soccer. It has been backed by clubs and next year's event is set to feature many of the biggest names in the sport, including Lionel Messi, Neymar, Kylian Mbappe and Vinicius Jr. Coming at the end of many leagues' regular season, FIFA said the dates would be "harmoniously aligned with the international match calendar" to ensure sufficient rest for players ahead of the start of domestic campaigns. The governing body has also set up a player welfare task force to be led by former Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger.

FIFPRO, which says it represents more than 66,000 players around the world, is not convinced. In October, its European division teamed up with domestic leagues and filed a legal complaint in Europe against how FIFA adds new and bigger men's competitions to the calendar.

FIFA hit back, noting that European clubs often fill their summer breaks with exhibition matches around the world. It accused some European leagues of acting with "hypocrisy, and without consideration to everyone else in the world."

Gelson Fernandes, a Swiss former player who now works for FIFA with the title Director Member Associations Africa, said that calendar congestion is an issue only for a limited number of players who consistently go deep into tournaments with their clubs and countries. Rodri, who won Euro 2024 with Spain this year, and Alvarez, who helped Argentina triumph at the last World Cup, are two such high-profile examples.

"So it's a small group of players, that minimum percentage of them, which are affected," Fernandes told The AP. "And I don't think we should stop a competition which will give dreams and hopes to millions and billions of people around the world for that." ■

FEATURE

US OPEN DOUBLES CHAMPION MAX PURCELL SUSPENDED FOR ANTI-DOPING BREACH

Purcell, who is currently ranked No. 12 in doubles, teamed with Jordan Thompson to win the U.S. Open in September, and with Matt Ebden to win Wimbledon in 2022. He also finished as a runner-up in doubles at the Australian Open in 2020 and 2022...

BY STAFF WRITER

U.S. Open doubles champion Max Purcell has entered a voluntary provisional suspension under tennis' anti-doping rules. The International Tennis Integrity Agency announced the sanction in a statement after the 26-year-old Australian admitted to violating Article 2.2 of the Tennis Anti-Doping Program "relating to the use of a Prohibited Method."

Purcell, a two-time Grand Slam champion in doubles, posted a statement on Instagram saying he had "unknowingly received an IV infusion of vitamins above the allowable limit of 100 ml." Purcell said he had told the medical clinic that the infusion needed to be below 100 milliliters because he was a professional athlete, but that the medical records he received back showed that the IV had been above that level.

"This news was devastating to me because I pride myself on being an athlete who always makes sure that everything is WADA safe," Purcell wrote. "I volunteered this information to the ITIA and have been as transparent as possible in trying to put this whole situation behind me."

The ITIA said the suspension took effect on Dec. 12, and time served under provisional suspension will be credited against any future sanction. The length of time of the voluntary suspension was not specified by the ITIA.

"During the provisional suspension, Purcell is prohibited from playing in, coaching at, or attending any tennis event authorized or sanctioned by the members of the ITIA (ATP, ITF, WTA, Tennis Australia, Fédération Française de Tennis, Wimbledon and USTA) or any national association," the ITIA statement read.

Purcell, who is currently ranked No. 12 in doubles, teamed with Jordan Thompson to win the U.S. Open in September, and with Matt Ebden to win Wimbledon in 2022. He also finished as a runner-up in doubles at the Australian Open in 2020 and 2022.

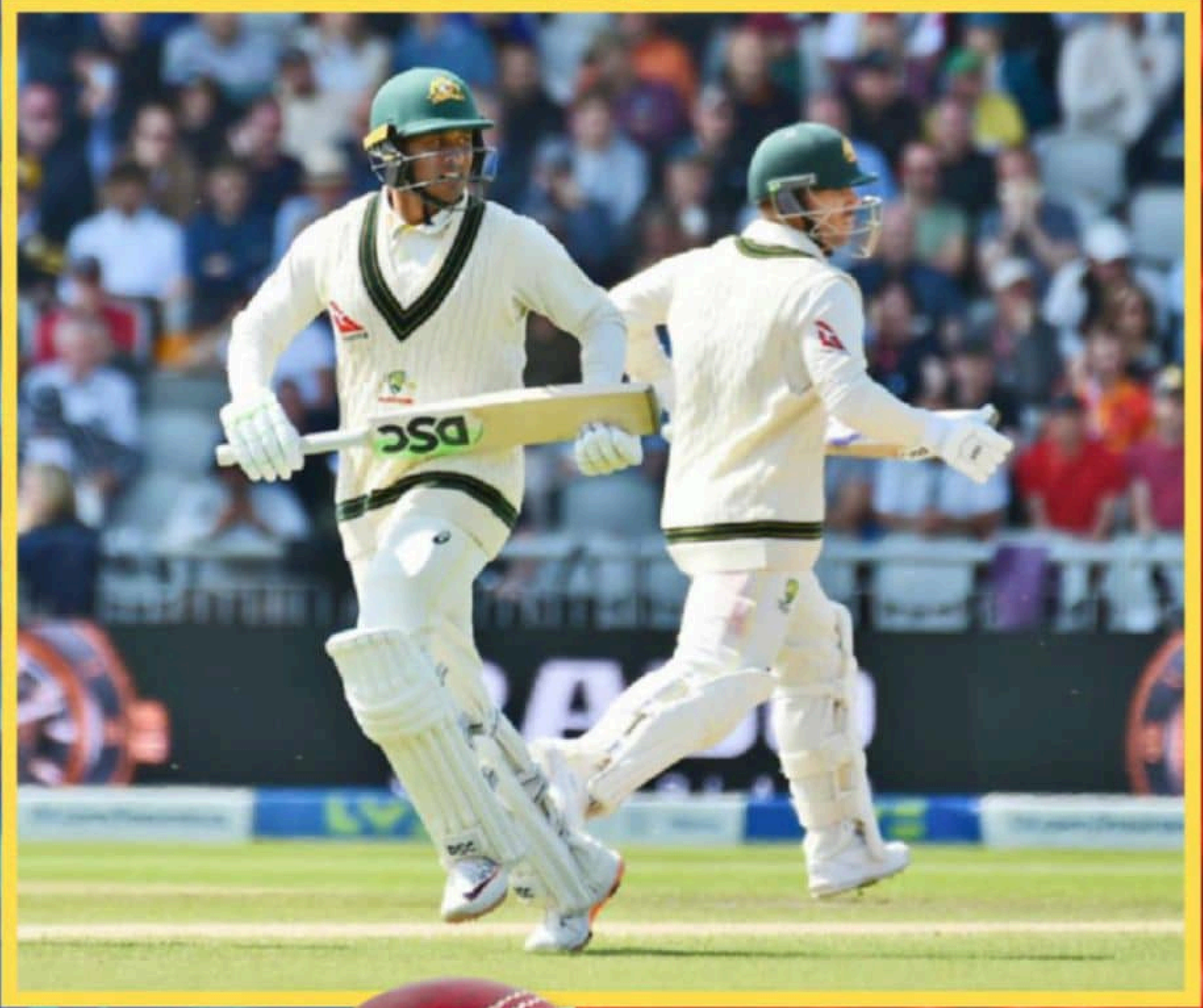
Purcell, No. 105 in singles, was not listed on the Australian Open entry lists released this month and did not receive a wildcard or feature on the qualifying entries. The ITIA did not say whether Purcell's absence from the draw of the tournament starting Jan. 12 was because of the sanction.

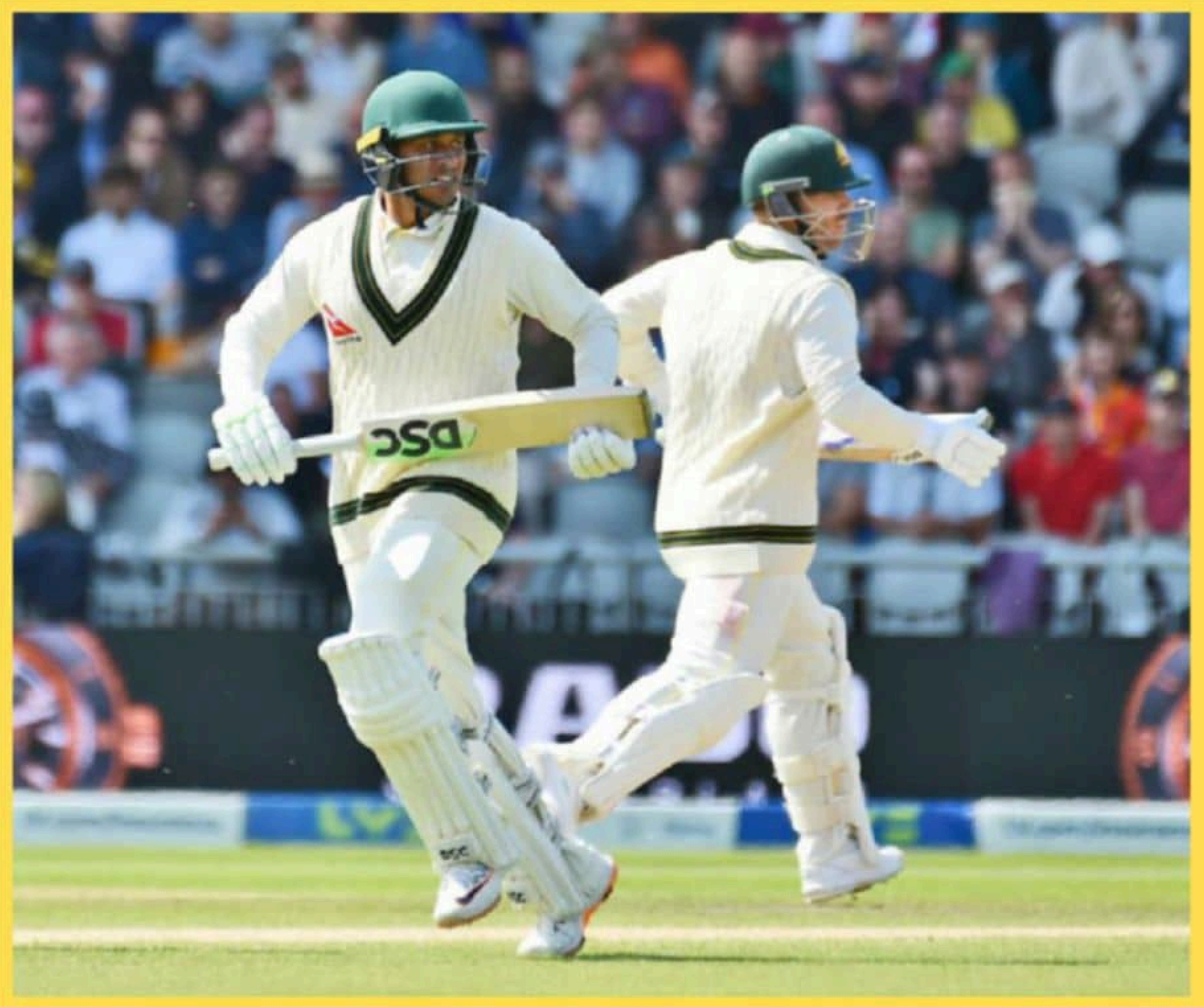
The latest doping violation in tennis comes just weeks after five-time Grand Slam champion Iga Swiatek accepted a one-month suspension after testing positive for the banned substance trimetazidine.

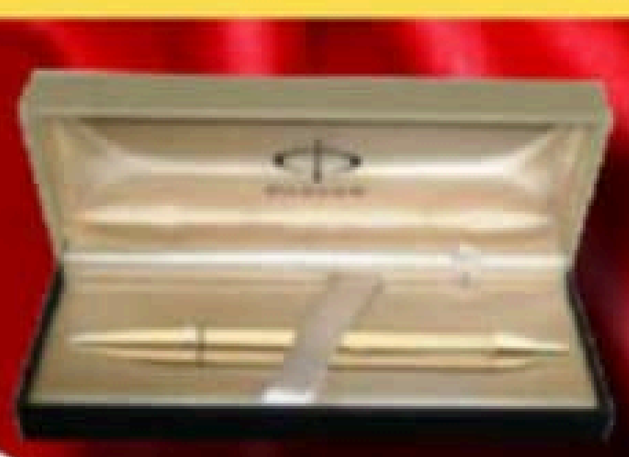
Top-ranked men's player Jannik Sinner, winner of two Grand Slam titles this year, was exonerated by the ITIA after twice testing positive for a trace amount of an anabolic steroid in March. The World Anti-Doping Agency appealed the ruling. ■

FIND SIX DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THESE TWO PICTURES

CONTEST







In this contest you have to spot six differences between both the pictures. Three lucky winners will get a Parker pen each.

RULES & REGULATIONS FOR THE CONTEST

- **Last date for entries:** February 25, 2025.
- A draw will determine the winner.
- Winners name will be announced in the next issue of cricket today.
- The prizes may vary from the one shown.
- Send in your answers along with your name, occupation, address, contact No. and Email ID at our postal address.

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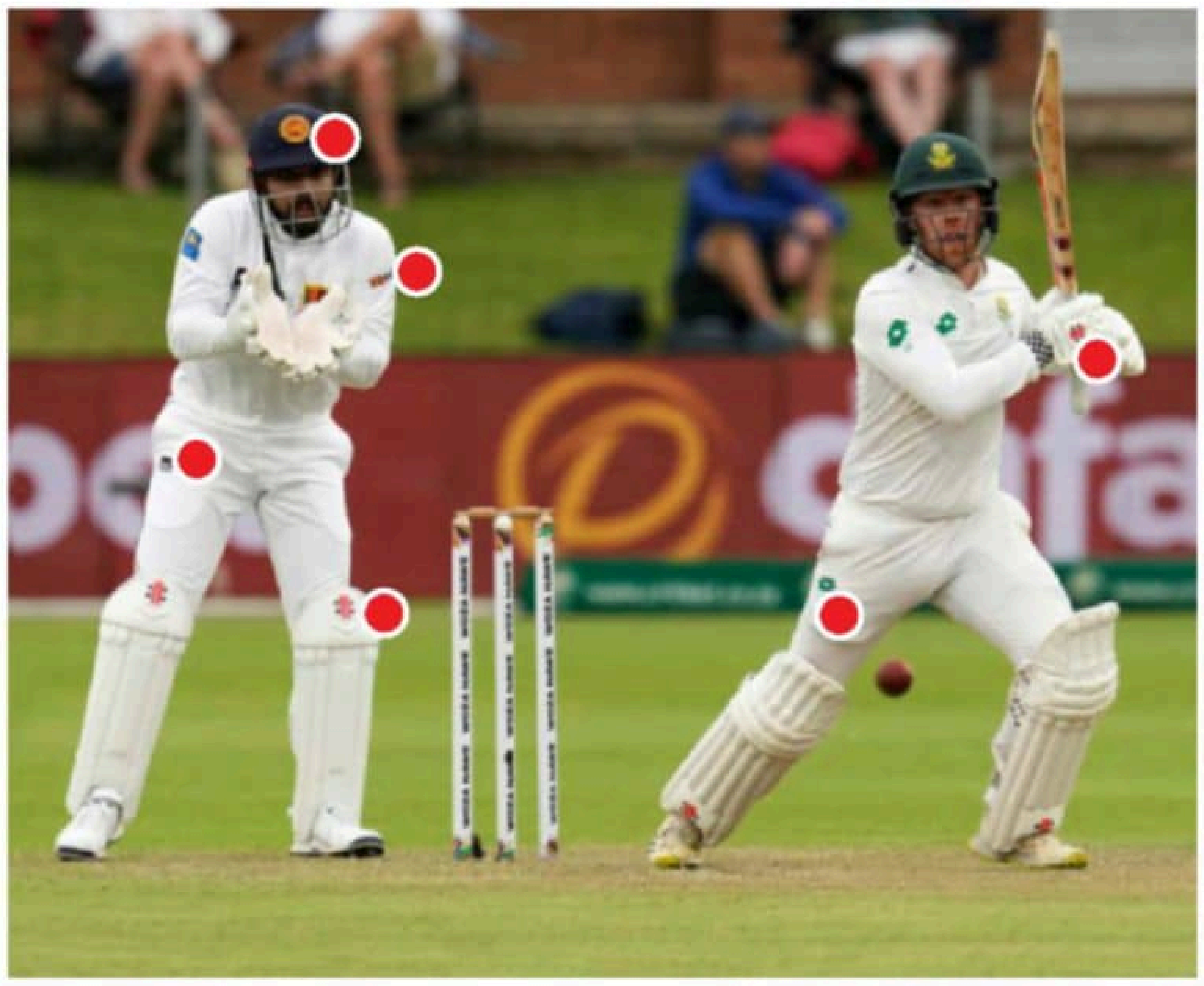
LAST WEEK'S ANSWER:



Last months's winners: Pawan (Delhi), Shanu (Noida), Bhairav (Gurugram)